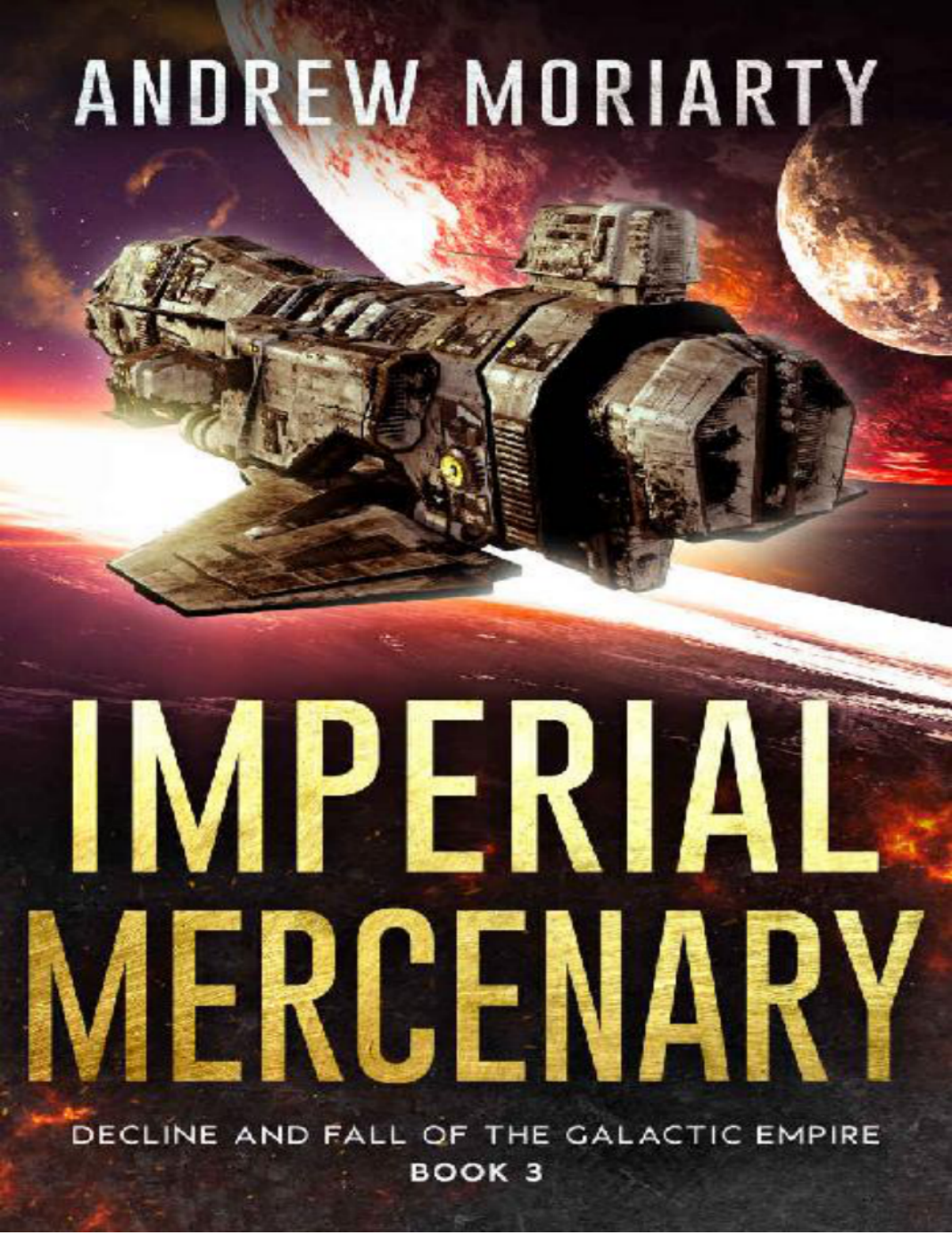
ANDREW MORIARTY



IMPERIAL MERCENARY

DECLINE AND FALL OF THE GALACTIC EMPIRE
BOOK 3

Imperial Mercenary

Decline and Fall of the Galactic Empire

Book 3

Andrew Moriarty

Copyright © 2023 Andrew Moriarty
All rights reserved.
Version 1.00

This is a work of fiction.

Names, characters, businesses, places, events and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

Special thanks to my dedicated team of beta readers – A J, Alex, Bryan, Catherine B, Christopher G, Dave M#1, Dave M#2, Dave W, Djuro D, Greg D, Haydn H, J Anderson, JFB, Jolayne W, Keith C, Kent P, Michael G, Michael R, Peter B, Ryan P, Scott, Skip C, Susan G, Tigui R, Vince P, and to my editor Samantha Pico.

Chapter One

"Going to the hanging?" the waitress asked, pouring steaming brown liquid into a cup. "It's going to be a good one."

Dirk, Ana, Gavin, Lee, Dena, and Scruggs sat at the café's breakfast table.

Ana ran his finger inside his mug and examined the smeared silver dust. "I'm thinking of it myself. Haven't been to a good hanging in a while. What makes this one so special?"

The waitress took his glass. "Big group. Some real desperadoes there. The Lee gang, three of them. Two murderers, some smugglers, and a couple crazies."

"You hang people for being crazy here?" Scruggs pushed her mug across the table. "That hardly seems fair."

"Hun, it's not being crazy that's the problem. Slide those other cups over here. It's what people do when they're crazy."

"What do they do when they're crazy that's so bad?" Scruggs asked.

Ana took a swig, then spat it out. "This is not coffee."

"That's right, hun," the waitress said. She filled another cup.

"It's not coffee." He sniffed it. "It smells like coffee, but it isn't."

"Yep."

"We wanted coffee."

The waitress hoisted the pot to eye level and clicked the cover. "We don't have coffee here. Just this. It's made of beans, kind of like coffee beans. It's got plenty of caffeine in it. But it's not-coffee."

"Why do you call it coffee, then?" Ana asked.

"We don't. We call it not-coffee. Says so right on the menus." She pointed at the menu on the wall.

The group swiveled their eyes. Below the specials was a list of beverages. Prominent on the list: *Bottomless Not-Coffee—1 Credit.*

"Huh," Dena said. She sniffed her cup. "It smells like coffee." She sipped. "But it tastes like copper."

"Metallic hot water." Scruggs pushed her cup away. "Why are you killing crazy people?"

"It's a figure of speech, honey. We don't kill crazy people. And they're not crazy. They're sick. Heavy metal poisoning. Pollution from the mines. Eats away at the brain after a while, makes you do crazy stuff."

"What type of stuff?" Dena slurped.

Scruggs raised an eyebrow. "You like it with copper?"

"It's hot," Dena said, "and you said it has caffeine. I've had worse."

"Crazy stuff," the waitress said. "Strip naked, run around screaming, climb up the walls, that sort of thing. Not that there's anything wrong with stripping naked and screaming. I've done that a time or two."

"Who hasn't?" Ana said. "Twice on Sundays." He reached into his side pocket and palmed a flat pack of pills. There were seventeen left. He popped one into his hand and dropped it into his coffee. "Is our food up yet?" he said, sipping the pill-laden coffee.

"I'll check." The waitress finished pouring and went back to the kitchen.

Dirk ignored his cup and ran his finger across the table. He rubbed the dust between his finger and thumb. "Gritty. And dense."

"Which explains the weather," Ana said. "Cloudy, miserable, with a touch of killer metallic dust. Any last changes to the plan, Navy?"

"Why are you asking me?" Dirk looked around the table. "Why is everyone staring at me?"

Dena glanced over her shoulder. "You're in charge."

"Not really. It's Cheong's plan."

"That fills me with confidence," Dena said, craning her neck backward for a better view.

Ana stood. "Switch chairs with me, Nature Girl."

Gavin twisted to follow Dena's look, then twisted back. His eyes darted around the room.

Dena swapped chairs with Ana. "Thanks. That guy back there is hot. I'd rather look at him. Your ugly face will put me off breakfast."

"That's my custom weight loss program," Ana said, "having you stare at my face. Besides, I get all warm and mushy inside when I see young love."

"The only way you'll get warm and mushy inside is if we stuff you in an oven and bake you like a cake," Dena said. "And don't bake you long enough. Why do you want my seat?"

Plates clashed in the kitchen. The lights flickered, but the cooking sounds didn't even pause.

"Sightlines," Scruggs said. "Centurion changed so he could get a better view of that other door. The windows are so dirty you can't see in or out of them, so they're not an element. He figures the biggest threat is from the far door, so he wants a clear view in case he has to shoot somebody."

Dena twisted in her seat. The main door, with its double foyer and blowers, was now behind her and to her left, as were the windows.

"And that guy does look tasty." Scruggs grinned at the back table.

"Need to work on that smile, Baby Marine. Oh. Ana's right-handed, so if he pulls a weapon, he can shoot at the door without hitting me."

“That assumes I care about hitting you,” Ana said. “Not a safe assumption on your part.”

Dena twisted back to the table. “But we’re not against the wall, so who’s guarding his back?”

A bearded man at the far table spoke to his companion. They laughed and grinned at Dena.

Dena beamed at the bearded man at the other table. “I get it. We are. Scruggs and I. He knew we’d be distracted by Mr. Movie Star over there. So, we’re going to have our eyes over his shoulder the whole time.”

“You can’t fight hormones,” Ana said. “Why not use them? Our tactical situation is now excellent. Four armed people with mutually supporting fields of fire, a public location, multiple exits. Gun hands clear. Soon, it’ll be dark enough outside to cover nefarious activity. And plenty of not-coffee.”

“Six armed people,” Dena said.

“Four,” Ana said. “Scruggs and I have sidearms. You have your knife and that slingshot thing. The punk here will have something hidden. He always does. The medic”—he waved at Lee—“has her kit to consider, so even if she has a weapon, her primary focus will be medical and communications. And Navy is, of course, useless most of the time.”

Dirk stopped rubbing the dust between his fingers. “I’m management. I got us this job.”

“Not true. Cheong got it for us,” Ana said. “What are you looking at, Engineer?”

“What?” Gavin said. He’d been staring over Dirk’s shoulder. “Just watching the crowd.”

“Pretty focused. You’re scanning every face in the place. Are you waiting for somebody?”

Ana’s chair creaked as he shifted his weight and moved his eyes. After a moment, Scruggs did, too.

“No firefights before breakfast,” Dirk said. “But I am curious why you all are so focused on the room.”

“Centurion and Scruggs have been scanning the room since we got here. For that matter, so has Dena,” Lee said.

“Ana’s always got a plan to kill everyone he meets. Scruggs is learning that from him. Dena’s just horny.”

“Hey,” Dena said. “I’m not horny.”

“All evidence to the contrary,” Ana said.

“Not just horny. I can take care of myself in a fight.”

“I am forced to agree,” Ana said. “But now I’m curious, too, Engineer. Why are you so jittery?”

“This job bothers me,” Gavin said. His eyes tracked the room. “This

place bothers me."

"It's just a job," Ana said. "Just some crates of medical supplies we need to pick up. Stolen, probably, but not the first time we've taken stolen stuff. You've done this before. Why so upset now?"

Gavin didn't answer but continued to scan the room.

"Everything is taken care of," Dirk said. "It's all arranged."

"Why do I not completely believe that?" Ana said.

"Centurion, I'm not stupid."

"Just lazy and unmotivated?" Dena said.

"We need money," Dirk said. "This was the best deal we could find. The best Cheong had."

Two food carriers appeared, and the group shut up as they dumped plates of bacon and eggs on the table. The waitress dispensed cutlery and napkins.

Dena forked a piece of egg into her mouth. "Hope your deal finding is better than your landings."

Dirk tensed, and the others went silent.

Dena grimaced. "I mean, that's what it feels like when you're driving those trucks. That's what I meant. It's like we're on a spaceship crashing into the planet."

"Smashing into the planet is more like it," Lee muttered.

"You folks spacers?" the waitress asked.

"You think we'd be eating in a place like this if we had a spaceship?" Ana said. "Good enough and all. But, no, we're contract drivers for DX-30 Corp. Gonna be doing some regular load runs, out to the farms and back."

"Which farms?" the waitress asked.

"Don't know yet," Ana said. He crossed his knife and fork squarely across his plate. "Tomorrow's our first day. We just got dirtside yesterday. Had a shower and a nap in a real bed. Free day today, start first shift tomorrow."

"Dirtside," the waitress said. "First shift. Hun, that's spacer talk. We say Monday at eight."

"It is," Ana said. "It's also Army talk, which we picked up when we're getting moved around. Hard habit to break."

"I know you were definitely Army. And probably the others. The young missy here and the beard there." She indicated Dirk and Scruggs. "The rest of you, not so much."

"What makes you think I was in the Army?" Ana asked.

The waitress pointed at his cutlery. "Only Army-trained folks put their knife and fork down like that. Others just drop 'em on the table."

Ana picked up his fork. The random order of the other's knives and forks contrasted with his rigid layout. "We're family, from Pallas. Cousins. We travel together. Except for Lee here, of course. No Jovians

in the family. But she was our medic back when I served. Took good care of me when I needed it and said she wanted to see the galaxy. So, we look out for her."

"Should have figured you folks for Pallas people," the waitress said. "You all stick together. A Pallas crew comes in here at night, as my shift is getting done. They all yammer away in that silly language you all have. Don't understand a word. It's all Greek to me." She slapped her thigh and chortled. "All Greek to me, get it?"

Ana grimaced. "You know how many times we've heard that joke?"

"Doesn't matter, still funny. Well, welcome to DX-30. Hope we see you back for breakfast or lunch. The trucking contracts usually have you away a couple days, then back. Best breakfast in town. All our food comes from the windiest side of the valley."

"Windy, that's good," Gavin said. "Say, you probably meet all sorts of people here in the café, don't you?"

"I meet them all, hon. Why you ask?"

"Well, we're going to be driving trucks," Gavin said. "And things have been known to fall off the back of trucks from time to time. Might be good to know somebody who could deal with that sort of thing."

"I don't do that myself," the waitress said. "But there are some folks who do. They eat here from time to time."

"We'd like to meet them," Gavin said. "Maybe you could point them out to me?"

The waitress cocked her hip. "For a consideration, of course."

"When we've got something, we'll come in for breakfast," Gavin said.

"And bring your consideration with you when you do, hun. Remember that. But be careful with that sort of thing. The corps don't like thieves. They catch you with goods more than ten thousand credits, then it'll be your hanging we're watching."

"I'll remember that," Gavin said.

"You never did say what the crazy people were getting hung for," Dena said.

"Oh, that? Cannibalism."

Everybody stopped eating. Dirk put down his cutlery. "You mean to say you're hanging a cannibal today?"

"Two of them," the waitress said.

"You're hanging *two* cannibals today? I find that hard to believe," Dirk said.

"You think we shouldn't hang people who eat others? Why, the one chased a person down, hit him with a brick till he was dead, and then started chewing on his arms. That's a hanging offense in my book. And the other—"

“I’m not arguing the punishment,” Dirk said. “I’m arguing the prevalence. How do you have two cannibals at the same time?”

“Oh, it’s a big problem here,” the waitress said. “Those metals mess up your brain. They’re in the dust. A little bit, and you get headaches but too much, and you start to get cross wired. Go nuts. Every month, we get somebody with too much mercury in their head or osmium or something, and they go crazy. If they’re lucky, they just strip naked and climb walls. If they’re not, they kill people and eat them.”

Dirk looked at the door. “That’s why the vent’s on the way in.”

The café had a two-door system, like an air lock. Patrons entered, closed the outer door, then fans fired down for five seconds, then the second door opened.

“The windiest side,” Ana said. “Outstanding. The dust blows in the wind, doesn’t it?”

“Comes out of the stacks from the mines,” the waitress said. “The dust settles. On the windy side of the valley, the dust gets blown away, mostly, so not so much on the plants there. Ten times as much dust on the dry side as the windy side.”

“No salads for lunch,” Ana said. “Got it.”

“Cows eat plants,” Dena said. “So do pigs. Lots and lots and lots of plants. Grass too. What happens to them when they eat grass?”

“Doesn’t affect them the same way, hon,” the waitress said. “They can eat all they want, and it doesn’t affect them. Of course, it does build up in the tissues. Have to be careful with how much meat you eat.”

As one, the group looked down at their breakfast—eggs, sausage, and bacon—and shoved the plates away.

“Maybe just another cup of that not-coffee,” Ana said.

“Sure thing, sugar pie,” the waitress said, pouring. “Here you go.”

“You said one of the cannibals, he hit somebody with a brick, killed them, then started eating them.”

“That’s right.”

“But you didn’t say what the second one did.”

“Him? Oh, that’s bad.” She poured the last cup of not-coffee. “He ate somebody, too. But it was different.”

“How was it different?”

“Didn’t kill him first,” the waitress said. “Just started eating. Say, who gets the check?”

***

“Wonderful job, Navy,” Dena said, exiting the café and popping her breather on her face. “You brought us to the poisonous planet of the cannibal miners.”

“Cheong didn’t say anything about cannibals,” Dirk said, attaching

his breather, shaking his hands. Dust had already coated his arms. “Or poison dust. You nearly blew it in there with your space talk, Nature Girl. And since when do you call me Navy?”

“If the dusty shoe fits, wear it,” Ana said. “Transit terminal that way.” He pointed at a sign, and the group headed down the dusty road.

He and Gavin carried tool bags. Lee had a medical pack. Dena’s jacket had large pockets, and she twirled a forked stick- her slingshot. Scruggs carried a cylindrical package over her shoulder, decorated with a picture of a fishing rod.

“Or on this planet, gnaw on the shoe till you get fresh brains,” Gavin said. “But you need to keep quiet, Dena, not blow our cover. Remember, we’re truck drivers.”

“Normally, I’d say, ‘bite me,’” Dena said, “but given what happens on this planet, I don’t want to give you any ideas.”

“We don’t have to worry about people eating our brains,” Lee said. “It’s medically impossible. Your skull is in the way. You’d be dead before they got near the brain.”

“See?” Dirk said. “Jovians never lie. Stop worrying.” A group of laughing kids bumped into him as they dodged by. “If this crowd heading for the square is anything to go by, killing cannibals is a popular pastime here.”

“Now, gouging out an eye and eating it,” Lee said, “or biting off a nose, that can happen while you’re alive. Even while you’re asleep.”

“Could you not stop while you’re ahead?” Dirk said.

“It’s part of the not-lying thing,” Lee said. She stepped next to Ana to read the signs. “Here, suburban train in seven minutes.”

The group crowded into the entrance of the slow-moving, revolving door. Part way in, fans blasted from the roof, then a few feet later a different set blew upwards. This happened twice more before they exited to the inside. They descended stairs to the transit tunnels, air blasting their face. A brown four-car train arrived two minutes later, and they surged inside along with a dozen other passengers. There were no seats, only straps and rails, and the train rocketed along the tunnel for nine minutes until their stop came up. Their group exited the train, and they climbed the next stairs, ubiquitous fans blasting air behind them.

Doors puffed dust behind them onto the empty street. They regrouped, then turned left. The road was all warehouses and commercial buildings. On that day, a holiday, pedestrian traffic was light. The main sun had set. Streetlights came on as they walked. They crossed a side street and walked deeper into the neighborhood. They turned left again. Shops disappeared, and only blank-faced warehouses lined the streets. The dust on the road was undisturbed.

“Spread out,” Dirk said. “See anybody?”

“Killer cannibals?” Dena asked.

“Lookouts,” Dirk said. “Centurion? Engineer?”

Ana fished in his bag, then strapped square goggles to his head. He swept his view up and down the buildings. “Nobody up ahead, Navy. Not near any windows. Not unless they’re thermally shielded. Infrared is clear.”

They hunched as a gritty dust cloud blew down the road.

Gavin pulled a scanner from his tool bag and examined the display. “Nothing special electronically, Pilot. No alarms. Police bands are quiet. But I see cameras up ahead.”

“Anybody watching them?” Dirk asked.

“Can’t tell, but they’re broadcasting. If we have to jam anything, they’ll know. Or the recordings will. This is sweet gear Cheong got us. Can we keep it after?”

“That’s the deal I made with him,” Dirk said. “We keep the portable scanner, the sensor goggles, and the radar detector for the ship.”

“Outstanding,” Ana said. “Navy, for once, you’re doing your job.”

“I live for your approval, Centurion,” Dirk said. “And if the engineer can get the radar detector working, even better.”

“Already installed,” Gavin said. “Needs to be tested, though.”

“People,” Dena said, “coming our way.”

Ana stepped left and dropped his hand to his belt. Gavin unbuttoned his jacket. Dena produced her sling and fitted it to the wooden handle. She twirled it around her arm like a child’s toy. Scruggs faced them and pantomimed a conversation, keeping her back to the street. Ana dropped back to the rear, behind Dirk and Lee.

Three men passed on the opposite side of the street, arguing. Breathers masked their faces and muffled their words. They ignored the six crew.

“Scruggs?” Ana said without turning.

“Moving off, Centurion. Didn’t give us a second glance.”

“Which is exactly how professionals would act,” Gavin said.

“Professionals? Which professionals? Whose professionals?” Dirk asked.

“Professionals. Never mind,” Gavin said.

“Alley’s not far ahead,” Ana said.

“Ladies?” Dirk said. “You ready?”

“All set, Pilot,” Scruggs said, hefting her bundle.

“Whatever, Dirk,” Dena said. “Let’s get down to business.”

“Don’t you normally say that when you—” Scruggs said.

Dena laughed. “Yes, yes, I do.”

“Lee, are you ready?” Dirk asked.

Lee had been kicking the dust as she walked. “Ready enough,

Pilot."

"Love your enthusiasm," Dirk said.

"I'll do what needs to be done," Lee said.

"Next left," Ana said. He ran his sensor goggles up and down the buildings facing the street. "We look clear."

The group passed a battered warehouse with *Kim's Furniture Importing* on the front and turned down the alley.

Ana loitered at the entrance, watching the street.

Kim's warehouse stood four stories tall on the left side, an unidentified two-story brick building on the right. Silver dust covered the bricks, and deeper dirt crunched underfoot. Forty feet down the alley, the brick wall on the right ended, replaced by a twenty-foot-high chain-link fence, topped with razor wire, closing the gap between the brick building and a garage farther down.

"Remember," Dirk said, halting next to the fence, "Cheong said nothing broken, nothing missing. The trucks aren't on inventory as operative, and nobody uses that back garage. If we get in and out without any notice, it could be weeks before somebody notices they're gone."

"We heard you the first time," Dena said. She sneezed. "Baby Marine, do your thing."

Scruggs was already unwrapping her package. Inside was a rug, two coils of fishing line, and a handful of lead weights with holes in them. She grabbed the end of the fishing line, knotted on a lead weight, and passed the end to Dena.

Dena produced a longer rubber sling from her pocket, snapped it over the wooden slingshot she'd been carrying, and tested the pull. She took the weight from Scruggs and fitted it in the cup at the end of the sling. Dena extended the sling, leaned back, and released. The slingshot snapped, and the weight rose in the air, pulling the line behind it. It slowed at apogee, hung for an instant, then dropped back to earth. The descending weight clipped the top of the razor wire and bounced down in front of them on their side of the fence.

"Not as much wind as I thought," Dena said, reeling the line back in. "Next shot will do it."

The next shot did. The weight landed inches inside the far side of the fence, and as it plummeted, it dragged the line behind it. Scruggs fed the line out until the weighted end landed on the far side of the fence. Dena used her slingshot handle to drag the line through and tied it off on their side. Then she and Scruggs repeated the process three feet farther down. This time, she got it over on the first try, and they tied the line off. They had two lines over the fence, rubbing over the razor wire on the top.

"Ana? Anything?" Dirk asked.

“Clear here, Navy. Not a soul on the street, and no thermal changes in anything I can see.”

“Engineer?”

“Everything’s fine. Lots of chatter about the hanging downtown. It’s a big affair. The security boys and girls are taking bets on who will last the longest at the hanging.”

“Last the longest?”

“Apparently, if your neck doesn’t break right away, you suffocate, but it takes a while.”

“How long?” Lee asked.

“Some of the bets are thirty minutes…”

“The Emperor’s scrotum. We’d better not get caught.”

“For a lot of reasons,” Gavin said. “But no interest in us here.”

Scruggs and Dena had unrolled the rug, tied the fishing line into perforated holes, and set it on the ground. Each had one line in hand.

“Dirk, we’re ready,” Dena said.

“It’s getting dark. Fast as you can,” Dirk said.

“I’ll bet,” Scruggs said. “That’s normally your line, Nature Girl.”

“Only if you favor quantity over quality, but in Dirk’s case, there’s not a lot to choose from either way. On three. One, two, three.”

The two women hauled the fishing line in. The rug jerked off the ground in fits and starts, then stabilized as they found their rhythm. The fishing line raced over the razor wire at the top, gliding over, dragging the rug up the fence.

Gavin reached into his tool bag and tossed a more substantial rope to Dirk. “Nothing on the radio.”

“Keep listening,” Dirk said, catching the rope. “Lee?”

Lee slid over to Dirk.

He took the middle of the line and double knotted it to her belt, then coiled up the first half and hung it over her shoulder. “Shoes.”

Lee kneeled and unlaced her boots, then pulled her socks off. She stepped carefully, then whipped her foot up. “That hurts. That dust is sharp.”

Scruggs pulled her line hand over hand. It snagged. “Stop,” she hissed. Dena paused, and the rug dropped a foot. Scruggs jerked the line, trying to free the snag.

“Don’t break it, Baby Marine,” Dena said.

“Buzz off, Nature Girl. I got this.” Scruggs wiggled the line again.

“Problems,” Dirk asked.

“Not now, Pilot,” Scruggs said. She continued jiggling the line, and it came free. “Pull, Dena.”

Dena and Scruggs pulled the two lines over until the rug dangled below the razor wire.

“Lee, you’re up,” Dirk said.

Lee adjusted the coil of rope on her shoulder, stuck a barefoot toe in the holes in the fence, then climbed up. Jovians were human—mostly—but subtle differences in genetics, body type, and plenty of time in zero G gave her excellent balance, good upper-body strength, and skinny toes.

Lee reached for the dangling rug and ducked between it and the fence. Holding on with one arm, she used the other and her shoulder to shove the rug up and flip it over the razor wire. The first time, it caught and stuck.

"Pull it up again," she called down.

Dena pulled her end up, but the line snagged, then parted. "Emperor's hairy toes." The line dropped free on her side.

"No toe jokes," Lee said. She grabbed the falling rug, leaned into the fence, released her other hand, snagged the rug's free edge, and threw it high. She fell back but snatched at the fence with both hands. The rug soared over and dropped, draping over the razor wire.

"Got it," Lee said. She ducked till she was outside the rug and climbed until she topped the fence. She swung a leg over, sitting on the rug, protected from the razors. "Going down." She tossed the loose end of the rope into the alley and climbed down the warehouse side.

Dirk, Dena, and Scruggs grabbed the dangling end of the heavier rope and braced her as she climbed down. Seconds later, Lee dropped onto the ground.

"Next," Lee said, leaning back and bracing the line.

Scruggs grasped the rope and used it to walk up the fence.

"Stop," Ana said. "Two people coming down the road. Thirty meters. Everybody, freeze."

Dirk and Gavin stepped into the fence and grasped the rope. Scruggs hung still. Lee froze. Dena backed to the wall. Ana stepped back into the alley's shadow.

"Nature Girl," Ana said. "Get your slingshot ready with a rock."

Dena fumbled a shot out of her pockets and loaded her sling. "Finally giving my marksmanship the respect it deserves?"

"I don't expect you to hurt them or even hit them. My revolver will make an Imperial-damned noise if I have to shoot. I need them distracted for a second. When my count hits zero, shoot at the far side of the road, high up that building. It will make them look away as they walk past."

"What if they look back?"

"Adapt, overcome—get ready to shoot in six, five, four." Ana waved as he counted down with his fingers. He did the last three in silence.

They heard them before they arrived.

"I don't think your mother gives me enough respect," a man said.

Dena sent a single shot well over their heads. It clacked off the far

building.

A woman answered. “If you ever got off the couch and went out and got a job, she’d—what’s that?”

“Nothing.” Two dark figures passed the alley mouth. Their heads swiveled, but they didn’t break stride as the two walked past the alley’s entrance. “With my disability, it’s hard—”

“Being fat and lazy is not a disability, Frank. Maybe I should listen to my mother...”

The conversation faded as the two moved off.

Ana waited fifteen seconds longer, then peered out the front of the alley. “Clear.”

Scruggs clambered over the top. Next, Dena climbed up and over as Dirk and Gavin braced the line.

“Stop looking at my butt,” Dena said.

“We’re not,” Dirk said.

Dena stopped at the top. “Really? Why not?” She craned her neck. “Do I look fat in these, or—”

“Not now, Nature Girl,” Ana hissed from the front of the alley. “We’ll all stare at your butt later. Get those bags over.”

Dirk braced Gavin and his tool bag up and over, then Ana braced Dirk. Ana was left alone, but he fed the free end of the line through the fence before tying his bag to his belt and climbing up, and the others hauled him from the far side. After he clambered over the top, he held there, yanking the rug free, then tossed it down before he descended. As soon as he hit bottom, the others released the free end and dropped the rope.

“Scruggs, bring the rug,” Ana said. “Police the area. Check the ground, pick up any trash that identifies us.”

They collected scrap fishing line, a piece of fabric, and the two lead weights, then headed into the complex.

“What about footprints?” Lee asked. “And we scraped the dust clear.”

The fence gleamed silver where they had climbed, and the alley side was a mass of footprints.

“They’ll fill in overnight,” Dirk said.

“You think. But outstanding work, everybody,” Ana said. “Navy, where are these trucks?”

“Back warehouse. That’s what Cheong told me.”

They emerged from between the buildings into a large parking lot. Industrial vehicles of different sizes and shapes lined the yard—cement mixers, backhoes, electric delivery trucks, and forklifts.

“Supposed to be fueled up and ready to go. Must be that one over there.” Dirk led the way to the dirtiest-looking garage that faced the yard.

“Won’t we need keys? To start them up?” Dena asked.

“Keys are supposed to be in the ignition. Cheong said these are old-school trucks. First-colony design. Only basic engines and that sort of thing. No self-driving capability. Nobody would want to steal them.”

“That’s us,” Lee said. “Stealing the not worth it.”

“They won’t be missed, which is important because it will take time to load things, and we can’t hide the trucks we’re using to load the ship,” Dirk said. “Let’s get them and be done with it.”

The group trooped up to the warehouse.

“Chained shut,” Dena said.

“Nope,” Gavin said. He spun the lock and pulled the chain free. “Just wrapped, not actually chained. We’ll put it back when we leave.”

They each picked a side, and with three on each end, the doors slid open easily. There were no lights inside, but the forms of a dozen trucks loomed in the dark.

“These aren’t electric,” Lee said.

“Diesel,” Ana said. “Makes sense. Easier to build than electric, needs less technology, easier to fix. As long as you have a ready supply of hydrocarbons. Which maybe they do here.”

“Messes up the air, though,” Lee said.

“On this planet, who’d notice?” Gavin said. “Right. Everybody, pick a truck and let’s get going.”

Everybody scattered, opened doors, and climbed in. They’d spent thirty seconds feeling in the dark cabs before Scruggs hopped out and ran over to Ana’s truck, then climbed on the running board. “Centurion?”

“What now, Private?”

“I can’t find the computer interface. There’s no control panel. And there’s no joystick.”

“They don’t have a joystick. They have a wheel and pedals.”

“Pedals?”

“You do know about pedals, don’t you, Private?”

Scruggs shook her head. “No. What are they for?”

Ana leaned out the window. “You’ve never used pedals?”

“Not on a ground vehicle,” Scruggs said.

“With me, Private,” Ana said. Scruggs stepped back as he climbed out and followed him to the middle of the garage. Ana whistled. “Everybody on me for a second.”

“We don’t have a lot of time, old man,” Gavin said, stumbling out of the dark.

“We might have more than you think,” Ana said. “Hands up. Who can drive a standard transmission?”

Ana raised his hand, so did Gavin and Dena.

“I learned on Rockhaul,” Dena said. “Why are you asking?”
Dirk, Scruggs, and Lee exchanged glances.
“Centurion,” Dirk said, “what’s a standard transmission?”

Chapter Two

“First, second, third, fourth, reverse,” Ana chanted as Scruggs kept the clutch depressed and pushed the shifter through the gears. “Keep that up till it’s automatic.”

“This is stupid,” Scruggs said. “Why not computer-controlled joysticks like everything else?”

“It’s what we have. Turn the switch from off to start so we can use the wheel.”

“The switch controls the wheel?”

“Normally, off stops the engine but also locks the steering. Make sure the wheel is centered,” Ana said. “We’ll need to drive straight out.”

“How do I do that?”

“Spin clockwise till it locks, then counterclockwise and count the turns till it locks, then halfway back.”

Scruggs tugged the wheel. It moved an inch at a time until she stood and used both hands. “Two... uuurrg... three... Are you sure, Centurion?”

“This is a pain. But you’re going to be alone in the cab, so you need to know how to get restarted by yourself. Wheel centered?”

“Four. And back...” Scruggs grunted. “What colony would buy these, Centurion?”

“Not a single piece of electronics here,” Ana said. “It’s all mechanical, with a couple of hydraulics. A guy with a hammer and a basic machine shop can fix everything. These trucks can last a colony a hundred years, and they can be used as a pattern to make new ones. Can’t do that with hydrogen-powered fuel cells.”

Headlights flashed in the darkened garage.

“Pilot’s moving,” Scruggs said.

Dena was teaching Dirk, and their headlights had just lit up. His engine raced.

“Not for long,” Ana said. “Watch.”

The truck garage was at the back of the parking lot. Storage and repair sheds lined the perimeter, with a small office near the front next to the gate. The main gate was at least two hundred feet away from their garage, opening onto the main road behind the town to the spaceport and the mines. The gate was an extension of the chain-link fence and ran on a track. A post attached to the office held industrial lights and a camera alarm system. Clouds of dust blew through the

yard, hiding the vehicles.

Two haphazard lines of miscellaneous vehicles stretched from the front of the back garage to the gate. Small bulldozers sat next to panel vans and trailers attached to small trucks. Self-propelled road graders and diggers separated utility cars. No two were the same color, and they all had dents and scratches but were mostly clean of heavy dust. A narrow path led between the lines of vehicles to the gate.

The engine next to them revved higher, and Dirk's truck jerked forward, the gears shrieked and clashed, and it stalled when the engine died.

"Watch and learn, Private," Ana said. "That is, learn what not to do."

***

"I told you to let the clutch out slowly, you arrogant twit," Dena said.

"And I told you to kiss my—" Dirk mashed the Start button, and the truck jerked as the starter engaged and immediately stalled with the weight of the gears.

"Kiss your what?" Dena said.

Dirk closed his eyes. "Cheong didn't mention transmissions. Who even knows what a transmission is?"

"Anybody who's driven a truck. Didn't you learn this in Navy school?"

"I'm a starship pilot. I've never driven a truck on a planet. I've never even driven any sort of vehicle."

"Never?"

"Why would I? Stations always have electric carts and shuttles or trains on planets. The Imperial scouts had drivers. We don't have trucks on warships."

"I'm less and less impressed with this navy school. And unimpressed with your planning abilities," Dena said.

"Surprisingly, there are people other than you who I care a lot more about what they think about my abilities."

"Do they think you suck, too?"

Dirk pushed hard on the wheel. "Yeah, they do." He tapped it. "What am I doing wrong?"

"Not enough gas. You need the engine to be going fast enough to pull the truck forward. Push the clutch in, leave it in, and start the engine again."

Dirk did as directed, and the engine hummed.

"Good. Now, you need to give the engine gas to keep going when you let the clutch out, so feed it enough gas to keep it going."

"How much is enough?"

“It varies, but you’ve been giving it too little before. Try more this time. If you feel us stalling, depress the clutch.”

“Okay.” Dirk flexed his hands, then revved the engine and released the clutch. The engine coughed, nearly stalled as it engaged, until he dropped the pedal in. “Okay, that makes sense.”

“Glad you approve, Navy,” Dena said. “Now, try again. Just go slow and get us out into the yard.”

“We don’t want to break anything. Cheong was insistent that we leave no trace.”

“We should put Cheong in charge next time, then. Give it more gas this time.” Dena tapped the shifter. “We might be in third gear, not first. No wonder it’s hard to start.”

“Does that matter?” Dirk asked, easing the clutch out.

“Not unless you over-revved...”

Dirk released the clutch. The engine labored as the gears engaged, and he pushed the gas pedal down to the floor.

Gas flooded into the system, and the truck leaped forward. Dena hadn’t bothered to have him straighten the wheels before starting, so they swung a hard left, scraped Gavin and Lee’s truck, dented a door, knocked a mudguard off, then bounced sideways.

Dirk lost his footing and fell to his right. The truck rocked, and the wheels swung back to the right. He tried to recover his balance but only succeeded in slamming the gas again.

Under full throttle and in third gear, they bounced out into the yard. The truck tore to the right, smashed a small ditch digger into bits, sideswiped a towed electric generator, and bounced off the side of a panel truck.

Dirk yanked the wheel to the left and stamped his left foot. He missed the clutch but jammed his foot underneath the pedal. He tried to free it, but the collar seals on the side of his boots stuck, trapping his foot.

“Brakes. Clutch. Brakes,” Dena yelled.

“Trying,” Dirk yelled. He kicked his left foot up and down, but it was hung up.

He had to balance on his right foot again, which depressed the gas. The truck roared forward and left, mowing down a line of electric motorcycles, smashing them like toys, as the heavy bumper hit them at speed. Dirk weaved to the right, and they bounced up on two wheels.

“Don’t roll us,” Dena yelled. “There’s no frame up here. We’ll be squashed.”

Dirk pulled the wheel left, and the truck settled. They knocked over a cement mixer and smashed into the cab of a two-story-tall cherry picker, which teetered.

“Stop, you Imperial anus,” Dena yelled.

“How?” Dirk screamed back.

The gate was approaching. Dena leaned down and pushed the switch to off. The engine died as the magneto grounded, and the truck coasted.

“You broke it,” Dirk yelled, hauling on the stuck wheel. “Steering is locked.”

Ahead was a lowboy loader parked diagonally next to the gate. On board was a small-tracked ditch digger. Their momentum rolled them into the lowboy, up the loading ramp, and into the ditch digger, knocking it off. The truck rocked, then settled down at a forty-five-degree angle. Dust puffed up, then subsided.

Both were hanging by their seatbelt. Dirk grasped the wheel, and Dena held the dash.

“The Emperor’s entire council,” Dena said. The wrecked fence leaned against the truck. “I thought your piloting was bad, but this is something else.”

“The quality of instruction was poor,” Dirk said.

Dena wiped the sweat from her brow. “Doesn’t matter how good the directions are if you’re directing a moron.”

Dirk flexed a hand. “Doesn’t matter how smart you are if it’s an idiot telling you how to do something.”

“Okay, okay, we’re fine, we didn’t roll,” Dena said. “No alarms. We just need a moment—”

Behind them, one of the teetering cherry pickers overbalanced and banged into the side of one next to it. Three cherry pickers in a line toppled over, one after another, each hitting the next until the last one hit the side of their truck. Overbalanced, it rolled off the lowboy and smashed into the fence and the gate assembly. The sides of the truck were heavy steel, the gate light aluminum, and the gate crunched underneath. The truck slammed onto its side in a cloud of toxic metal dust, wrecking the fence, the gate, and blocking the exit from the yard.

Dirk and Dena lay there, stunned. The electric sensor cable on the gate registered the breach, and the alarm rang. Dena leaned back and kicked the windshield loose. Dirk let go of the wheel and dropped on top of her. She cursed him as they crashed out and clambered into the yard.

Ana walked up to them and surveyed the construction yard. Broken and smashed vehicles littered their trail. The motorcycles were random piles of plastic and glass. The cherry pickers looked undamaged but would need cranes to be set upright. The ditch digger was a total write-off. The concrete mixer had tipped over, and the big metal mixing bowl was rolling across the yard, like a giant misshapen

bowling ball.

Ana had to yell over the blaring alarm. “Well, you’re right about one thing, Navy.”

“What?”

“After this, nobody’s going to care that the trucks were stolen.”

***

Ana and Gavin took charge. Scruggs drove her truck out and pinned the front of the lowboy in place with her bumper. Gavin directed Lee to the back end of Dirk’s former truck, and she used the lowest gear to bulldoze it out of the way. Scruggs’s truck acted as a fulcrum to keep the mangled mass from spinning back into the yard. After two minutes of work, they had shoved enough of a path that Lee and Scruggs were able to push their trucks past the crunched vehicles, through the destroyed gate, and park out on the main road. Dena had picked three other vehicles, started them up, checked the gas, and left them running. Ana pulled a hammer from his tool bag, climbed up the side of the building, and beat the alarm to pieces, killing the noise.

“Nature Girl, punk, get in one of those trucks and follow me. Leave Scruggs and Lee in between you and me—we need them where we can see them. I’ll take Captain Navy here up front. Might be best if he doesn’t do any more piloting till we’re on a ship. Move out.”

Dirk didn’t say anything as he followed Ana into the yard and climbed up into one of the remaining trucks. Ana expertly pulled the vehicle into the yard, drove out on to the road, passed Scruggs and Lee, and waited as the others formed behind him.

“Will we have enough space with only five trucks?” Dirk asked.

“They’ll have to do. That was a truly execrable experience back there, Navy.”

“I did the best I could,” Dirk said. “Tell you what, next time we go to land, I’ll give you sixty seconds of training, and then let you give it a try. Wonder how you’ll do?”

Ana kept his eyes on the road. “You should have asked who could drive a truck.”

“They’re all just trucks to me,” Dirk said. “I didn’t know there were different types. Besides, adapt, overcome, all of that. We’re moving, right? Not in jail yet.”

“Well, no.”

“Then, shut up and soldier, soldier. Things happen.”

Ana nodded. “Roger that.” He slowed to a stop and waited till the other five trucks stopped, then turned a corner. “There may be some discussion concerning your leadership going on over the radio right now.”

“I’m not the leader. I’m just the pilot,” Dirk said. “And anyway,

now is not the time. We're committed. Do your job, and I'll do mine. In fact, it would be better for all of us if somebody else was in charge."

Ana took his eyes from the road. "Better for everybody but you. But we'll sort it out for now. Remember, lead, follow, or get out of my way."

"I don't take orders from you."

"Then, get out of the way." Ana twisted to avoid a pothole.

"Or else what?"

"Or else I'll do what I have to do." Ana took his eyes from the road. "You won't like that part."

***

The convoy of five trucks sped out of the commercial area of the city, past a sign that said, *Spaceport 5km*, and past yards full of mining equipment. Two kilometers short of the main spaceport gate, they turned left down a well-traveled dirt road.

Ana stopped. The other trucks did likewise. Ana and Dirk hopped out and walked down the line.

"Time to change IDs," Ana yelled. "Everybody. Suit up."

"Hey there, Skipper," Gavin said, hopping out of his truck. "I'd like to talk about something."

"I wouldn't."

"You will when you hear it," Gavin said.

"Really doubt that. Anybody hurt? No, change clothes, then," Dirk said. He stripped off his dirty coveralls.

Underneath, he had his regular skinsuit, now decorated with blue-and-red identity patches on each breast. The others stripped, too, displaying their own patches.

"I'm not happy with the way things are operating here. Not on the ship, I mean. On the ship, you're fine, but sorry, Skipper," Gavin said. "I think somebody else should be in charge—in the field, so to speak."

"Let me guess," Dirk said, dropping his coveralls and kicking his feet loose, "you know just the person to be in charge?"

"I do."

"You think everyone will follow your orders? Even if you're not happy with the way I do things, you think you're the man to take control? And the others will let you? Why you? Why not one of the women?"

"That's mutiny," Scruggs said. "I won't do it."

Lee shucked her coveralls and shook her head.

"Well," Dena said, stepping out of her coveralls, "if you all insist, I'll do it. But only if you call me, Mistress Dena, Supreme Goddess of the—"

“Oh, no, not me,” Gavin said. He pointed. “Centurion, he should be in charge.”

Everyone stopped and looked at Ana.

“Centurion?” Dirk said. “Feel like a promotion?”

Ana grinned.

Dena shuddered. “I told you to stop that smiling thing,” she said. “It gives me nightmares.”

Dirk glared at the group. “I’m going back to my truck. Centurion, deal with this and then come with me.” Dirk remounted his truck.

Ana folded his arms and faced the group. “Well, Navy there, I do think that he’s not the best with hand weapons sometimes. Or tactical coordination. Or a lot of things. And I do think that I can move these trucks along and get what we need and get back to the ship. And if somebody needs shooting along the way, I’m happy to do it. You agree, Engineer?”

Gavin nodded.

Ana walked up and slapped him on the shoulder. “Get the goods. Get back to the ship, get loaded—with your help, of course—take command on the way back, and get us all there safely. If we need to shoot something on the way back, I can take care of that. Or even Scruggs and Dena now, for that matter. And you know what will happen next?” Ana slapped him on the shoulder again.

Gavin shook his head.

“Nothing. We’ll just sit there because none of us CAN FLY A STARSHIP.” Ana folded his arms again. “Which is why Navy is in charge, whether he wants it or not. Because the starship part is the important part. Now, get changed, get back in your trucks and let’s go. MOVE.”

The group scattered. Ana opened the door of Gavin’s truck and gestured him in. Gavin looked at him, then climbed in. Ana closed the door, then stood on the running board.

“It’s a good idea, Centurion,” Gavin said. “Dirk is losing the plot here.”

“Perhaps, but that’s a discussion we can have later. No changing horses in midstream.”

“What happens when we’re out of the stream?”

“Ask me then,” Ana said. “Ask me then.”

***

The five trucks continued along the road past more mining facilities and climbed the hills. DX-30, planet and town, existed because a hundred-mile-wide meteor had blasted into the planet a million or so years ago, snapped the crust like a rubber band, created a giant impact crater, and pushed the crater walls a mile high. The crater

walls were almost pure nickel, molybdenum, and other metals. The resulting volcanic activity had mostly—but not quite—sterilized the planet. Natural flora was limited, but it could survive the insane metal levels that permeated the global soils.

Seven mining operations lined the foothills created by the crater walls, complete with open pit mines, smelters, and transportation nodes. The real prize wasn't the nickel but the other trace elements, platinum, palladium, and so on. Parts per million wasn't much in the way of output, but when you were processing a billion tons, it added up.

Ana drove, and Dirk navigated as the trucks climbed the hill. Near the top, they passed under an elevated rail line.

"That the mass driver?" Ana asked.

"Yes, downhill from here. Our turn is on the right near the bottom," Dirk said. "I didn't ask. Am I still in charge?"

"Of course. You think I'd let the punk run things?"

"Thought it would be you running things."

"If I wanted to run things, I would. I don't need help to be in charge. Least of all his, or for that matter, yours."

Dirk bit his lip. "I shouldn't be in charge of this group. I'm not fit."

"Not sure what that even means," Ana said. "Fit?"

"I'm not trained for this."

"Didn't know there was a course in breaking into warehouses, stealing trucks, collecting smuggled goods, and blasting our way off planet. Must have missed that. I wonder what the exams would be like?"

"I'm not even a good naval officer. I always get my people killed."

"I've heard that," Ana said. "Thought they put you on trial for that."

"And won. Convicted."

"Convicted of going back and trying to rescue your troops. Failing, but sometimes you fail. Things don't always break your way."

"Command didn't think so."

"Command is an ass," Ana said. "You tried to pull those troops out yourself. That counts for something."

"I screwed it up," Dirk said. "It's my fault they're dead."

Ana nodded. "Yep. Happens that way sometimes." He downshifted. "Going slower than I like but gotta give those newbies enough time to react to the road. I can see the spaceport to our left. How far to this yard?"

"It's only ten miles. You should be in charge."

"Nope. I'm tactics. Tell me what you want done. I'll get it done. Which things to do, that's somebody else."

"My life hasn't been a model of great strategy up to now," Dirk

said.

"And mine has?" Ana pointed. "Is that our turn?"

***

The trucks rolled down the side road and up to a gate. A man with a full-face breather helmet stepped out and pulled the gate wide, then the five trucks rolled in. Pallets covered with fabric lined the yard, and a forklift rumbled behind them. Ana stopped his truck and waited till everyone behind him rolled to a halt. He stepped down from his cab, walked to the side, and waved at each driver with both hands. He pointed at Gavin's truck and mimicked a three-point turn to swivel a one-eighty.

Gavin nodded, and Ana gestured to the other trucks to pull forward, turn around, and back up until it lined up in front of the pallets. Once he was sure everyone understood, he returned to his truck, pulled the turn, and backed into place.

He stepped down and slammed the truck door as Gavin was backing into place, then stopped in front.

Dirk hopped out, reached back into the truck, pulled a cap over his head, then grabbed a small case and joined Ana.

"Showtime, Navy. You ready?"

"Does it matter?"

"Not in the least."

They walked past the pallets. Four men with full helmets stood, waiting.

"Which one of you is Watkins?" Dirk asked.

"That's me, General," the lead man said.

"Take off that ridiculous helmet."

"I'll get poisoned. So will you."

"Not in five minutes, you won't. And it's disrespectful not to show me your face. I don't tolerate disrespect."

The man unclipped his helmet. His face was forgettable, and Dirk didn't even try to remember it.

"Here"—Dirk held up a chip—"are your authorization papers." He handed Watkins the chip. "And here"—he handed over a different chip—"is your full payment, as agreed."

Watkins weighed the two chips. "Full payment? No motivation for us to help load up, then, is there. Now that we've been paid."

Ana reached for his weapon, but Dirk grabbed his arm. "Calmly, Centurion." Dirk turned to the others. "I understand, Mr. Watkins, that peasants like yourself are unused to considering consequences, but if you do not fulfill your end of the bargain, they will be dire."

"Don't seem dire with only the two of you."

"We have the might of the Confederation behind us." Dirk tapped

his cap. It was a Confederation naval officer's hat, and it matched the rest of his uniform. "If anything happens to us, a great many people will not rest until they locate you and demand an explanation. A detailed explanation. Now, get our five trucks loaded up."

"Six trucks," Watkins said.

"Five is what the paperwork said," Dirk said. "Five is what you get."

"It did not say five. It said six, and if you think—"

"Shut up, peasant," Dirk said. "Just load them up. Make it work. We get everything we've paid for, even if you have to hand-carry it yourself. I don't know why we have to do this on a holiday, at night, and I don't understand your requirements for hiding from your own customs, but I work for the Navy of the Free Confederation, and you'll give us what we paid for. By the four gods, the sooner I'm off this planet and onto a ship, the better. Centurion?"

"Sir?" Ana asked.

"Supervise the load-up. All the trucks fill up. Don't take any nonsense from them. My patience is gone. I'm going inside the cab, where I don't have to smell this planet." Dirk sniffed. "Or its inhabitants."

***

The forklifts made short work of the loading at first. The trucks were sized to allow two standard pallets to fit easily in the back, and they already had clamps. After each truck backed up, Gavin and Ana supervised the tie-downs. After loading ten pallets in five trucks, Ana, Gavin, Watkins, and his crew stared at the remaining piles of boxes.

"Crates stacked four-by-four," Ana said. "That's six or seven in each of the trucks. There's room in the back. Everybody grab a box, and we'll be out of here." He popped a box onto his shoulder and walked out to the farthest truck. He broke out in a sweat partway, and by the time he got to the back, he was gasping for breath. After shoving the box into the back, he walked to the driver's side.

Scruggs sat at the wheel, watching in the mirror.

"Centurion, you look bad."

"Pills," Ana said. He pulled a bottle from his skinsuit pocket. His hands were shaking, and he couldn't pop the cover. Scruggs grabbed it from him and shook out a pill, looked at his face, then shook out a second. She leaned over and popped them into his mouth, under his tongue. Ana grasped the side of the truck and held on. "Five minutes. That's all I need."

***

Gavin helped shoulder the first group of boxes onto his truck.

“That’s seven.” He reached down and slammed the tailgate up.

“Go faster if all your people would help,” Watkins said, heading back to pick up another load. “Your officer is a dork, but the drivers could take some.”

“Naval ratings don’t carry stuff,” Gavin said. “Nor do officers. You’re lucky the centurion lowered himself to help carry even one.”

Watkins hauled another crate up. “Didn’t lower himself much long—first chance he got, he’s up there smooching with his girlfriend.” He gestured with his chin.

Ana was standing at the door of Scruggs’s truck, leaning in. From a distance, it wasn’t clear what he was doing.

“He always had a way with the ladies,” Gavin said.

“Surprised at that. Were you all in an accident?”

“What?” Gavin asked.

Watkins pointed at the dents, the scratches, and the missing mudguards on the side of Gavin’s truck. “Looks like you smashed something.”

Gavin shook his head. “Not while I was driving.”

“Pretty old trucks,” the man observed. “Surprised you Navy people don’t have better.”

“They’re not ours. We rented them here.”

“Rented? Why not rent something newer?”

“We need less talking and more loading. Let’s go.” Gavin walked back to the pile.

Each truck took a few minutes to load, and they were behind schedule, but everybody wanted out of there. The cases were too heavy for a single man, so when Ana rejoined them after, Gavin called him to help. The two of them split a box and carried it to the truck.

Dirk called Ana over to his truck, leaving Gavin alone. One of the others signaled him to grab the side of a crate and cart it over.

Gavin took up the slack, and the two of them carted to Dena’s truck.

“Confederation navy, huh?” the man asked, his face invisible behind his breather.

“Technically, Navy of the Free Confederation of States, as it says on the crest, but we don’t expect Dirt Siders to know the difference.”

“Eat exhaust, spaceman. I’m not a Dirt Sider. Well, I am now, but I did a stint years back, on the St. Yekaterinburg. Not entirely voluntarily, you understand, but it could have been worse.”

“Well, thank you for your service,” Gavin said.

“Your patches are backward,” the man said.

“What?”

“Patches,” the man said. “Chest patches. Ship goes on the left, name tag on the right. You’ve got them reversed. Surprised your centurion

didn't catch you. Mine sure did."

"You're misremembering, friend," Gavin said. "This is the correct way. Name tag right, ship left."

"I did thirty days of bread and no wine for having them reversed the second time," the man said. "My centurion thought I was messing with him. I remember that month, for sure."

"You're wrong," Gavin said. "You get old. Your memory goes. Things that happened long ago get confused. What's your age now, oldster? How long since you were in?"

The man helped throw the crate in the back of Dena's truck. He flipped the mask up, and Gavin couldn't suppress a wince. The dust and the weight had made him walk like an old man, but he wasn't much more than Gavin's age. "Thirty-two. And it was four years ago."

"You're wrong," Gavin repeated.

"Must be it," the man said. "Five more to go, one more run." He walked back to the boxes.

Gavin waited till his back was turned, then sauntered to Dirk's truck.

Dirk sat in the passenger seat, ostensibly reading his comm unit, listening on Cheong's provided electronic snooping gear.

"Engineer, we've got problems," Dirk said as Gavin arrived. "There are all sorts of alerts out now. Local security caught the break in, and they are searching now. Centurion's trying to plot an escape route. Only good thing is that they don't know exactly what the trucks look like."

"That doesn't make sense. There's a crashed one there. They should know it's one of those."

"They think we stole something else and used these to batter our way out. They've called a crew in to do inventory. There's no way, to quote the radio. 'Anybody would be stupid enough to steal antique trucks with no ground effect or self-driving capabilities,' they say."

"Here's to stupidity," Gavin said. "Including ours. Our patches are reversed. Name tag's on the wrong side."

"No, it's not," Ana said, arriving. "I checked everybody. They all have name tags on the left. Just like in the navy."

"Emperor's rotting bones," Dirk said. "Yes, just like in the navy. The Imperial navy. The Confeds reverse it."

Gavin rotated his shoulder and glanced at the others. "There are still four crates there, and they're not picking them up, just talking. Something's wrong." He rotated his shoulder again. "These crates are heavy for medical supplies."

"How heavy should medical supplies be?"

"We don't have time for a weight discussion," Ana said. "I'll call the others. The six of us can take them."

“No shooting,” Dirk said. “Dead people will bring more problems. Better to keep this a simple case of bribery and theft, like these four believe. You two, come with me. Follow my lead.”

Dirk swung out of the car and stalked to the group of four.

Watkins crossed his arms. “Look here, General, a few things don’t match up. Your uniforms aren’t quite right, and not having the right number of trucks, you said five, but—”

“I lied,” Dirk said. “We’re not Confederation Navy. And you did tell us six trucks, but we brought five. Deliberately.”

Watkins’s mouth gaped open.

“We are not Confederation Navy,” Dirk said. “We’re special forces commandos. These aren’t our regular uniforms. But I don’t care about that. I do care about the five trucks. I don’t trust you to not substitute something, so I wanted you to have to break up these pallets.”

“Why would you want that?” Watkins said.

Dirk looked left and right. “Men?”

Ana and Gavin dropped their hands to where concealed holsters should’ve been.

Dirk kicked a crate. “These four crates here would have been the last loaded and at the bottom of the pile of others. So, they’re the most likely to be short loaded or substituted. Open one up so we can inspect them.”

“Inspect them?”

“Do you really think we’d buy six pallets of medical supplies without inspecting them?”

“Six pallets of medical supplies?” Watkins said, then nodded. “Right. Of course, I get it. I misunderstood, General. Sorry. Jayfee, get a crowbar.”

“Right here,” Jayfee said. He slid the bar under the top of the crate and cracked the top. “You want to see one of each?”

“One of each?” Dirk nodded. “Yes, of course one of each.”

“You bet,” Jayfee said. He cracked the top of three cases and levered each crate open.

Inside were cardboard boxes.

“This one, four rifles and one thousand rounds of rifle ammunition. This one”—he opened the next box—“one thousand rounds of pistol ammunition, and of course, here.” He opened the last box and tossed a round object to Dirk.

Dirk used both hands to catch it.

“Your standard case of twelve grenades, just like on your order. And as specified,” Jayfee said, pointing at a tube in the bottom of the case, “a rocket launcher to fire the grenades in antivehicle mode.”

“Ammunition and grenades,” Dirk said.

“Just like your man, Cheong, said you wanted,” Watkins said. “I

told him we didn't have the permits to get it off-planet, of course. But he said you being the navy, there would be no problems moving it."

Dirk handed the grenade to Ana.

"No problems at all." Ana surveyed the trucks. "One hundred ninety-two crates of assorted small arms and ammunition. That, we'll take off-planet." He smiled at everyone. "Outstanding."

Chapter Three

"Grenades?" Gavin said over the radio. "I thought they were medical supplies."

"That's what Cheong told us," Dirk said.

The trucks had changed order. Dena led, followed by Lee and Scruggs, then Gavin and Dirk. Dirk had everyone key up the radio before they left. The tailgate of Scruggs's truck gleamed as the lights hit it.

"And of course you trusted Cheong," Gavin said.

"Not for a second. I figured he'd try to screw us on payment, not on pickup."

"We're going to get arrested. Again," Gavin said.

"I don't think so," Dirk said. "I think we can pull it off."

The radio was silent. Ana glanced sideways at Dirk. "Always optimistic. I like that. There's something sweet in a childlike insistence on seeing the good in things, even as they collapse around us."

"The pilot's right," Lee said. "We can get them out of here. I know we can."

Dena's voice came up. "Because you have faith in Dirk's ability to create a magic trick?"

"No, I think Cheong's a lying deadbeat."

"I'm not arguing," Dena said.

"But he's a greedy, lying deadbeat. If he didn't think we could get these weapons off-world, he wouldn't have set us up. Because if we get caught, he doesn't get paid. Why would he go through all this effort, giving us info, setting up meets, getting us these uniforms, helping us with supplies, if he thought we'd be caught? What's in it for him?"

"There is the small matter of some bounties on us I've been reading about," Gavin said.

"What bounties?" Dena asked.

"The Confeds have a big warrant out on the Skipper. Have for a long time. Dead or alive. And the Empire's got an Imperial warrant out on him too. Fifty thousand credits. He has to be alive, though."

"That's big money," Dena said. "He's like a walking savings account. If we ever get in a jam, we should think about that."

"We're not turning the pilot in," Scruggs said. "He's our leader."

"I'm not saying turn him in. It's just an interesting fact, is all."

"Some other facts," Gavin said. "I got a note from an old friend.

There's an Imperial warrant out for me now. Ten thousand credits. For 'consorting with known fugitives.' The rest of you are on that warrant, too."

"I'm worth ten thousand credits?" Dena said. "Mother would be so proud."

"Well, if your mother is proud, Scruggs's mother would be ecstatic," Gavin said. "Her warrant is a hundred thousand."

Ana downshifted and slowed, then leaned over and grabbed the radio from Dirk. "Want to confirm what I just heard. Our most valuable fugitive is now Private Scruggs?"

"Not private. She should be a princess for that amount," Dena said. "Princess Baby Marine."

"Scruggs, you have anything to say?"

"No," Scruggs said.

They waited. Nothing more.

Ana keyed the microphone again. "Nothing? They'll give ten times as much for you, and that's all you have to say?"

A pause.

"Yes. I don't know why there's that big a warrant out on me."

"Any guesses?" Dena said. "We're all interested now."

"Centurion, Pilot," Lee said. "I see lights coming over the top of the pass. Police lights."

Ana cut his headlights. "Everybody, lights off and stop. Now."

The convoy darkened. Ana slowed, then slid to a halt. The dust billowed. He opened the door and hopped out. "Navy, get on your radio thing..."

"Already there," Dirk said. He had the scanner in front of him and pushed headphones on his ears. "Stand by."

Ana walked to the front of the convoy, banging on each door as he went by. Everybody emptied out and met him as he stalked up to Lee's truck.

"Did they see us?" Ana asked. "See our lights?"

The group, minus Dirk, gathered at Lee's truck. The wind rose while they were loading, blowing grit into their faces. They ducked under hoods or hands, except Ana, who stared up at the pass, clicking settings on his goggles.

"Four cars. Definitely security. Not sure why the flashers. Probably habit."

"They might not see us yet from that angle," Lee said. "I saw the lights before the cars came over the top."

Dirk came up to the group. "I can't hear anything on the radio, but Cheong's gear got some text info. They know what type of trucks they're looking for now but not where they are. They're sending patrols to all the mines and the Starport to search the roads. Then

they'll let the gate guards know."

"No roads for us," Ana said.

"We can stay here while it's dark," Gavin said. "The dust helps. But the sun comes up eventually."

"And those 'medical supply' guys will probably remember what type of trucks we had," Ana said. "Or even drive by us when their shift ends."

"Starport is over there," Dena said, pointing. "We don't have to take the main road. These trucks are sturdy enough to drive across the fields. Then we'll be next to the perimeter road, not far from the blast berms. We can drive in."

"Isn't there a fence?" Gavin asked.

"I didn't look. Probably not much of one," Dena said.

"Everybody, stand still," Lee said. "They're driving by."

The group stood silently as the red-and-blue lights flashed in the distance.

After the lights departed, Gavin spoke. "There must be a fence. They need to stop smugglers, if nothing else."

"What smugglers?" Lee asked. "Sure, people smuggling stuff in, but we were searched when we landed. They don't search when we take off. This is a mining planet. What are people going to smuggle off of here? Rocks."

"And if we need a fence crushed, I've got a guy." Dena pointed at Dirk. "D. Friedel, Esq. Maidens rescued, fences crushed, ammunition discounts by the case."

"Worth a try," Ana said. "Back in your trucks. I'll edge by. Everyone, follow me. Let's go."

***

There was no fence. There was a river.

"Brilliant plan, Centurion," Dirk said, surveying the dark water ahead. A twenty-feet-wide river cut into the rocky plain. The bank dropped two feet, and the river stretched out in the dark. On the far side was a similar bank. "Glad to have you along."

"Got any brilliant ideas, Navy?"

"Not my department. I'm strategy. You're tactics. I told you to get us to the Starport. It's your job to figure out how."

Ana tapped the wheel with his fingers. "Typical officer, not taking responsibility for their poor planning."

"If it's typical, you must be used to it by now," Dirk said. "So, I'm sure you have a solution."

Ana tapped the wheel again. "See any rocks?"

"Nope."

The radio clicked. Ana had told them to stay off the channel, but

one of the others was getting impatient.

Ana opened the channel. “It can’t be that deep. Follow me. Full speed. We’re going to power across.” He depressed the clutch, gunned the engine, then released.

The wheels skidded for two seconds, then caught, and the truck shot forward. They cleared the nearby bank and dove off it. All four wheels went airborne, then slashed into the creek. The truck surged forward, slewed sideways, then the bumper smashed into the far bank.

Ana revved the engine and banged through the loose dirt, and they drove up, skidding sideways the whole time. The front reared up and then they climbed up over some rocks, the rear wheels pushing them. The truck surged higher again, then tilted, slammed down, and stuck. Ana gunned the engine, and the wheels spun.

The truck didn’t move. Ana depressed the clutch, threw the stick into reverse, and gunned the engine again. The truck stayed solid. Ana swore, shifted into first, and repeated. Nothing. He switched back and forth several times, gunning the engine each time. Then he stopped using the clutch and jammed the stick. The gears clashed, and they rocked but still didn’t move. Ana raced the engine again, then it stalled.

He jumped when somebody tapped on his window. It was Dena, identifiable by the starlight glinting on her hair.

Ana rolled down the window. “What?”

“Either of you geniuses know the meaning of the words ‘high-centered’?”

***

Ana savagely attacked the bank, hacking another shovelful of earth off and flinging it off in the distance.

“Centurion,” Scruggs said, swinging her own shovel load away, “we don’t need to throw so far. It’s tiring.”

“Mind your own business, Recruit,” Ana said.

“Not a recruit anymore, Centurion.”

“Mind your own business, Private.”

“You need to switch out,” Scruggs said. “You’ve been digging for an hour. You need to take a break.”

“I don’t need a break.”

“Not what I said.” Scruggs threw another shovelful away. “Don’t care whether you think you need a break, but you’re slowing down. One of the others will be faster, move more dirt. You need to switch out. For the mission.”

Ana dug the shovel in and gave her a death glare. Either she was immune to it or she couldn’t see it in the dark because she ignored it.

“Gavin can take over. It’s his turn.” Ana looked up at the bank.

Gavin stood there, hands in his pockets. “I’d be happy to miss my turn, Centurion, but Lee wants your advice at the other truck.”

Ana wiped his hands, nodded, and climbed up the bank. Dena had located a gentler drop on the far side, and they had dug a ramp down to the river. They were trying to finish this side up so they could get an exit ramp for the trucks to run out after they crossed the water.

“I’m surprised,” Scruggs said as Ana disappeared in the darkness, “that you didn’t try to razz him about his mistake.”

“I would,” Gavin said, “but he’s in a killing rage right now, and he’s liable to try to snap my neck.”

“And you can’t stop him.”

“I could,” Gavin said. He removed his hands from his pockets. One held a revolver. “I could shoot him five times before he got hold of me. Problem is”—Gavin put the revolver away and pulled the shovel out—“he’s so angry he’d probably keep killing me even after he was dead.”

***

Ana tracked the faint glow of Dirk’s flashlight. They had raided the toolkits of the five trucks after the accident. Between the kits, they found four spare tires, three jacks, two shovels, and one flashlight.

“How’s it look?” Ana asked.

“We’re ready, I think,” Lee said. “We’re tied around the axles on this one, and we’ve got it double looped, ready to go. We need the truck with the trailer hitch up in front, and we can pull.”

“How much longer will that take?” Dirk asked. “For the other truck.”

An engine hummed nearby, and a vehicle edged forward.

“Probably three minutes,” Lee said.

“Who’s driving?” Ana asked.

“Dena. She has the most experience with primitive driving.”

“She should have waited for me,” Ana said.

“That didn’t work so well last time,” Dirk said.

Ana cursed and kept cursing as Dena’s truck loomed in the darkness. Dirk shadowed the flashlight and waved it. She drove up to them.

“Pull the rope out and stand in front with it.”

Dirk and Lee dragged the tow rope out front, and Dirk waved his shadowed light. Dena turned, then backed down. Dirk looped the rope over the hitch, hopped out of the way, then waved his flashlight.

The front truck pulled, taking up the slack on the rope. Dena kept the power steady as it rolled, then it hung up as the tow rope tightened. The engine labored, and the front truck skidded from side to side as the wheels lost traction. Dirk and Lee dashed to the side.

Dena paused her pulling and leaned out the window. “Are his wheels on the ground?”

“No,” Dirk said.

“You and Lee get back there and hop up on his bumper. Give him extra weight at the front, and I’ll try to jerk him down.”

Lee and Dirk ran back and hopped up. The bumper was bashed in but wide and square enough to stand on. Dirk and Lee positioned themselves, and Dirk had to yell over the engine noise.

“On three,” Dena yelled back. “One, two, three.”

Dena floored the truck, and it jerked at the end of the tow rope. The extra weight dropped to the front, the wheels touched, and it rolled. Ana had flattened the gas when Dena called out, and as soon as the wheels gripped, the truck lumbered forward.

Dena’s truck raced as the tow weight came off, and she dropped her foot on the clutch and then the brake, skidding to a stop to keep from breaking the tow rope or the bumper.

Ana’s truck bounced over the hummock it was stuck on, and the front end plowed into the loose ground in a shower of dirt. The hood latch snapped, flipping the hood open, dumping Dirk and Lee sideways into the dust.

Ana bounced against his seat belt and got a glimpse of the hood popping up. He ducked and threw an arm across his face, but the smashed windshield showered him with shards. He kept his arm up and his face down, not seeing that Dena had stopped. His truck sped and slammed into her truck’s rear end, jamming into the tow hitch. His flailing arm hit the headlights, then the two trucks crunched to a stop.

Lee and Dirk staggered into the light, wiping the dust from their hands and faces. Dirk slapped his Confederation cap on his thigh, then used it to wipe his hair.

Ana climbed down and stepped into the light. He was cradling his right arm and bled from a dozen cuts on his arm and two on his forehead.

Dena stumbled back from her truck, pinching a giant nosebleed from slamming into the wheel. Blood covered the bottom of her face and chest.

Scruggs and Gavin had finished rolling their trucks over the makeshift ramps and drove into the light. Gavin stopped outside of the light beams and climbed down, then walked over to the cojoined trucks and the sweating, bleeding, dusty group. Scruggs joined him.

Gavin examined Dirk and Lee, taking in the mess. Dena held her nose and glared at him through the gloom. Ana picked glass out of his arm and threw it on the ground.

Gavin turned to Scruggs. “Seems like everything is under control

here, don't you think, Scruggs?"

"Adventure awaits," Scruggs said.

Chapter Four

"Just once, I'd like to load cargo during the day and with maybe a manifest. And something that we can tell people we have, instead of lying about it," Scruggs said, looking from her parked truck to the Heart's Desire. She and Ana waited next to their trucks as Gavin climbed into the ship's ventral air lock.

"But you're so good at deception now, Private," Ana said. "You've become quite the compulsive liar."

"I have, haven't I?" Scruggs grinned. "Thanks, Centurion."

"It wasn't a compliment."

"Why not? You don't think it's a useful skill?"

"It is, but you're not supposed to be proud of being able to do it."

"It took a lot of effort on my part to learn to lie. I wasn't very good at it. Shouldn't I be proud of my achievements?"

Dena arrived from her truck.

"Nature Girl," Ana said. "Please tell the private that it's disreputable to lie to people."

"It's disreputable to lie to people," Dena said.

"You lie all the time," Scruggs said. "Especially to men."

"They started it," Dena said. "Men have been lying to me since I was fourteen. Jimmy Daviz said if I showed him mine, he'd show me his. He didn't. That makes lying okay. Nice front end, Centurion."

"Thanks." Ana flexed a bicep. "I work out."

"I meant my towing hitch embedded in your grill. Good driving there."

"We're here," Dirk said, arriving from his truck. "That's what counts."

"And how do we get things loaded now?" Lee asked, looking at the ship. "We were supposed to have a working day to get the containers loaded up and a loading crew."

Ana looked at Dirk. "Time for some leadership."

"What?"

Ana gestured at the containers and the group.

Dirk grimaced. "We'll figure something out. We've gotten out of worse scrapes than this. If need be, we can move the boxes ourselves, and everything will be okay. I need to talk to Gavin." Dirk moved off to the containers.

"See, Centurion?" Scruggs said. "Very useful."

"What's useful?" Ana said.

“Security’s looking for us—or at least those trucks, and they know they’re stolen. The loading crew knows that, too. By now, they’ll be the first to turn us in. We’ve got an entire planet alerted to find us now. We’re sitting next to a grounded ship, and it’s surrounded by stolen weapons we have no way to move, and the pilot says, ‘We can just move the boxes ourselves, and everything will be okay.’”

Ana picked another shard of glass from his arm. “I heard him. And?”

“He’s clearly lying. This is a problem. But by lying about how much trouble we’re in, he’s pretending to be in charge of the situation, and we all think he’s a charming leader.”

“I never thought of it that way,” Ana said. “I never noticed him lying before.”

“You think he’s been telling us the truth all the time?” Dena asked.

“Of course not, no. He’s Navy, and everything the Navy has told me my entire career has been a lie. They’re all lower than a tabbo’s belly, so I ignore it now.”

The nearest container dropped into the dirt with a thud and a pile of silver dust. Gavin dropped out of the hatch, spoke to Dirk, jogged over and opened the container’s loading door, then trudged over to the group.

Dirk followed.

Gavin wiped the accumulated dust off his hand and stared at the group. “We standing around chatting or we going to get loading?”

“Unless you’ve got a forklift in your pocket, we’re going to have to load this by ourselves,” Dena said.

“Nope, I’m just glad to see you.”

“Not what I wanted to hear,” Dena said.

“Probably the first time you ever said that,” Ana said. “We can load them manually. Two people per crate.”

“Centurion,” Scruggs said, “I’m willing to work, but Dena and I and Lee, we’re not as big as you and the engineer. We can’t carry that much that fast. That loading crew before was all big men.”

“Well, Navy doesn’t have a brilliant plan right now,” Ana said. “So, we’ll have to do our best.”

“How do you know I don’t have a brilliant plan?” Dirk asked.

“Not now, Navy. We’re trying to salvage the situation here,” Ana said. “Look, Private, two of you can carry a crate, and the other can stage the next one for us, cut the straps, and suchlike. Gavin and I can carry one each.”

“I said—”

“Not now, please, Pilot,” Lee said. “We have to get loading. Centurion, it’s already twilight. It will be light soon, and those crews will be here. If we’re going to do this, let’s take the loose crates out of

the back of the trucks and not bother with the pallet, then lift."

"We can't—"

"Sorry, Skipper, not right now," Gavin said. "How about this. Lee and I will prep the ship and then you can get loading, but we'll leave the engines spooled up. That way, we load as much as we can, and when we see the police, we dash on board and launch at the last minute."

"That will work," Ana said. "Maximize things, right—"

A truck door slammed.

Dirk stuck his head out of his truck and sighted the ship. He ducked back inside, gunned the engine, and turned, forcing the group to back up until he was nearly parallel with the ship, nose out.

He straightened the wheels, stuck his head out the window, and mashed the gears. The engine belched a cloud of dark diesel smoke, and the truck roared backward. The crew scattered as he reversed, passed under the landing strut, swung right, and slammed into the container opening. Metal screeched as he skidded down the inside wall of the container, and he jerked his head in two seconds before the doorframe would have severed it. He popped the rearview mirror off.

Diesel smoke boomed out of the container, obscuring the entrance. After an almighty bang, the container shook against the chains, and the engine died. Diesel smoke and planetary dust swirled from the open container entrance. Dirk stalked out of the gloom, waving the smoke away. He stooped and picked up the broken rearview mirror.

"Dena, Centurion, take a truck each. There's room for one more in that container. Put two others in the one on the far side. Engineer?"

"Skipper?"

Dirk used the broken mirror to point. "You're playing cargo master now. Get on board. Drop two other containers and open them to load up. Ventral and far side should do it. Private Scruggs?"

"Yes, Pilot?"

"We've got tie-downs somewhere. Engineer will tell you where. Start locking those trucks down. Make sure they don't move when we lift. Seal the container door and attach power when you're done."

"Understood, Pilot."

"Pilot," Gavin said, "those tie-downs won't take a lot of Gs."

"Neither will we." Dirk pointed the mirror at Lee. "Navigator, get inside. Plot us a course to the handoff planet. No more than two Gs—ever—for any maneuvers. That will take time. Get started now."

"Okay."

"I'm going in to warm everything up and set us up for lift. Engineer, I'll start the engines and check engineering while you handle cargo. I want all those trucks loaded up and us ready to lift in

fifteen minutes. Dena, you help the engineer once the last truck is loaded up. Centurion?"

Ana folded his arms. "Yes, Navy. Want me to go tie some knots?"

"No," Dirk said. "Poor use of resources. Once your last truck is loaded, get your rifle and your goggles, get up top and survey for security. If any start coming close before the cargo master says we can lift, dissuade them. Don't kill anybody but break as many windshields or blow as many tires as you want. Don't wait for permission. Just do it."

Dirk looked at the bemused group. "Well? What are you all waiting for?"

Ana smiled. "Outstanding. You heard the pilot. Let's go."

Everyone scattered.

"Wait," Dirk yelled. Everyone froze and turned to him. Dirk lobbed the broken mirror at Gavin. "Catch."

Gavin caught it one-handed and turned it over. "Skipper?"

"Put that somewhere you can find it again. When we're at handover, I want it welded back on. Dismissed to duties." Dirk stalked off to the ship.

***

"Could it be some sort of reverse alcohol poisoning?" Dena asked. "Because I haven't seen him drinking in a while."

"His last three landings have been dry," Lee said. The crew, minus Dirk, sat in the lounge, eating food trays. "It's a trend."

"He lands better when he's drunk."

"You mean you puke less," Gavin said.

"Same thing, isn't it?"

"They don't bother me," Ana says. "I find them relaxing, compared to some."

"Centurion finds any landing where he isn't shot at relaxing," Scruggs said. She put a bowl down on the ground. "Rocky, come get your medicine." A skinny black dog bounded into the lounge from Scruggs's cabin. He sniffed the watery sludge, then enthusiastically licked it up. "Good boy."

"I smell beef," Dena said.

"I mixed Rocky's medicine in with some beef broth. Otherwise, he wouldn't take it."

"You wasted beef on a dog?" Gavin said.

"He's crew," Scruggs said.

"What type of medicine?" Ana asked.

"Lee said that there was too much radiation in that dust from DX-90, too many heavy metals. And we got dust everywhere, on the floor. It's getting into the food and water. She gave me potassium

iodide salts for him to drink."

"Radiation can damage the thyroid gland," Lee said, "and the thyroid absorbs potassium. We've got a lot of radiated potassium on board, so giving him extra clean potassium should keep him from absorbing more. His body will suck up the good potassium and not the bad potassium till we can get the ship cleaned."

"That's clever, Medic," Ana said. "Too bad you didn't do it for us."

Scruggs shoved a glass of basic in front of him. "She did, Centurion. Here's yours, and I've mixed some up for everybody." Scruggs pushed glasses in front of them. "Drink up, everybody."

Dena made a face as she drank. "Yuck."

"I kind of like it," Scruggs said. She licked her lips. "Spicy."

Ana pushed his glass back. "You can have mine."

Scruggs crossed her arms and glared at Ana. Ana drank it down.

"How long till the next port, Lee?" Gavin asked.

"Eight days in jump total, seven more now. Then five shifts till orbit. It's a station orbiting planet Jaytee."

"Big station?"

"Big enough. We can get supplies—repairs if we can pay, and there's a big cargo transshipment area. There's other stations within shuttle range."

"What's the downside?" Dena asked.

"There's Confederation customs and some Confederation security there. I'm not clear, exactly. The station is a free port—as is the planet—but the Confederation handles some border security 'on their behalf.'"

"Not a Confederation planet," Ana said. "No troops. But inside the Confederation customs union. They'll inspect our goods, and we can clear Confederation customs and security there if we want."

"We don't want," Dena said. "Or I'm sure that Dirk doesn't."

"Dirk doesn't what?" Dirk asked, climbing up from his quarters.

"To go to a Confederation planet. Like the one we're going to now," Dena said.

"It's not a Confed planet. It's independent, but there's a Confed section on the station where they do customs clearing and so on. We can clear Confed customs and head directly into the main part of the Confederation if we want. Makes it easier for ships clearing in and out and passengers."

"So, we don't have to talk to Confeds?"

"Not if we stay on the planetary side of the station," Dirk said. "That's why Cheong picked it. He can move in and out easily. We meet him there, transfer the goods to him, and he figures out what to do with them. This basic is spoiled." He held up his cup.

Scruggs explained about the potassium and shushed Rocky when he

growled at Dirk.

Dirk drank.

"Say, Skipper," Gavin said. "We'll have to be careful there. If the Confeds run one side of the station, and if they can get you there, well..."

"I'm not going to the Confed side," Dirk said. "We'll deal with Cheong and get out of there."

"And where do we go next?" Ana said. "Now that we're arms dealers."

"I thought we were carrying medical supplies," Lee said.

"No, you didn't," Dirk said. He spooned green algae mush into his mouth. "None of you did."

Everyone was silent.

Dirk spooned more mush into his mouth. "This is disgusting. Scruggs. You always manage to eat the worst stuff with a smile. What do you put on this to make it edible?"

"Vinegar," Scruggs said. She handed him a clear bottle. "The acid cuts the sludge, makes it kind of spicy."

"Can't taste worse," Dirk said, squeezing several spoonfuls over his tray.

"Care to explain your last comment there, Navy?" Ana asked.

Dirk took another spoonful. "Say, that's not bad. Scruggs, you're on to something there." He put his spoon down. "We're criminals. All of us. Renegades, escapees, mercenaries, something bad. We've all got warrants on us. Although, that hundred thousand on Scruggs is a surprise. Want to comment on that, Scruggs?"

Scruggs's face blanked, and she shook her head. "No."

"And all she says is 'no,'" Dirk said. "How did Ana get those fake IDs for us? Where did Gavin get fake IDs for the ship? Why won't Dirk fight against the Empire? Why"—Dirk reached down to pet Rocky, who slid back and snarled at him—"why does that dog hate me so much? These are life's mysteries. And like most of life's mysteries, we will never get an answer. Here's what I know. The Confederation wants me dead. The Empire isn't demanding it but won't complain if it happens. You others all have your problems. None of us are going to jump off this ship and get a job as a reservation clerk at a beach resort somewhere. Not with our past."

"We didn't sign up to be arms smugglers," Gavin said.

"You didn't complain about it, and you didn't ask enough questions. This was Cheong, by the Emperor's hairy anus. You met him. You're not stupid enough to believe his story about carrying medical supplies. None of you are innocents. Even Scruggs, for all her exposed naivete, can give a detailed briefing on the combat capabilities of an Imperial Pollux class frigate. Wonder where that

came from? I'm a drunken cashiered Imperial officer. Dena kills animals with her bare hands. Lee is entirely too comfortable pointing shotguns at us. If Centurion is really honorably retired, as he says he is, he could leave at any stop. But he doesn't. Nobody knows anything about you, Engineer. We're criminals and runaways, and it's time we started acting like them. Screw the Empire. The farther away we get from the Empire, the better. If Cheong wants us to smuggle weapons, we'll smuggle them. This time. I'd rather not, but we need the money."

Dirk slurped up the rest of his food. "Scruggs, you're amazing. This vinegar changed it from tasteless sludge to sludge that burns my tongue. It's palatable now. Right, I'm not an Imperial officer anymore. I'm looking out for myself. I've got a ship. It's stolen. I'm not giving it back. It needs a navigator and an engineer to run. That's you two." Dirk pointed at Gavin and Lee. "Stay if you want. And, Lee, you're a great medic. Even better. And if we're going to be moving some sketchy cargos, then Centurion is a paranoid's paranoid. He scares the bejoves out of most people. And he's teaching Scruggs."

Dena raised her hand. "Yes, but—"

"You're useless on ship," Dirk said. "Mostly useless, but learning. But on any sort of planet—you fill a gap. You know trees and weather and dogs and snow and trucks. We need that."

Dirk scraped the last of the food from his tray and licked his spoon. "We're all criminals, we're all lying about something, we're all wanted, and if we stick together and say screw the Empire, we'll be fine. Anybody want to leave, leave." Dirk tossed his tray into the recycling. "And I'm your leader because I'm the only one who can fly. Don't want to be, but there it is."

Dena raised her hand.

"No," Dirk said. "No more questions. That's the way it is. My way or leave. We'll deal with Cheong at this planet Jaytee, whatever it is. We'll get paid. We'll split the money, and we'll either carry on as we do now, or we won't. But no more arguments." Dirk put his spoon in his leg pocket. He ran his finger over the table and rubbed the dust between his fingers. "We'll never get this dust out till we're on a planet, will we?"

Gavin shook his head.

"Fine," Dirk said. He held out his glass. "Scruggs, give me a double shot of that salt. The rest of you take it, too. I don't want anybody down with radiation sickness. We've got weapons to smuggle."

Chapter Five

"Attention, present... arms!" the quartermaster called.

The six spacers stood at attention. The captain, Subprefect Markus, gave the crossed-chest salute. Devin, the Lord Lyon, Imperial Tribune and heir to the wealth of an entire system, removed his helmet, stepped out of the air lock and banged his head onto a waste return pipe and knocked himself down.

"Emperor's testicles," Devin yelled, sitting up and rubbing his head. "That hurt."

"Sorry, Tribune. Very sorry, Tribune," Subprefect Markus said, helping Devin sit up. "Not much room on a corvette. Sorry. Sorry. We should have warned you."

"No, you should not have," Devin sat up. "I should have remembered. My first ship was a corvette. Served on it for three years."

"I'm sure the tribune enjoyed the experience and served with distinction," Markus said.

Devin blinked and rubbed his head. "I hated it. I was useless and incompetent, and the captain hated me so much he almost busted a gut screaming at me. He tried to get me cashiered. If I hadn't been related to rich people, he would have tied me to the drive nozzles and had me test the flow rates."

"An obvious oversight on that commander's part. I'm sure he was punished afterward for such... such... not nice behavior."

Devin stood, stretching the last few inches slowly, keeping his head bowed. "Not nice behavior? That's your description."

Markus was sweating.

"I'm sure there was no reason to yell at you, sir."

"There was every reason. That captain made me miserable every day of the first year there." He touched the bulkhead. "Sturdy, these corvettes. He was right. I deserved every single punishment. It was the making of me. Best captain I ever had, ever. If I'm half the captain he was, I consider myself lucky."

"I'm sure... that... I'm sure... I mean." Markus shut up.

"You're extremely nervous, Subprefect. Why are you so nervous?" Devin glared at Markus, then turned back to Subprefect Lionel, who was exiting the air lock. "Why is he so nervous? What's he done to be nervous about?"

"He's not nervous because of what he's done. He hasn't been on

station long enough to do anything. He's nervous because everybody in the core thinks you're a crazed, violent lunatic, and he's expecting you to cut off his head with your sword."

"I do not cut off people's heads with my sword."

"As the tribune says, of course," Lionel said. "By the way, Imin asked me to remind you that you should look for new formal robes. He wasn't able to get the blood out of the last ones."

"I only cut the heads off people who have committed crimes against the Empire, as determined by the appropriate authorities," Devin said.

"I must have missed your new judicial titles, then," Lionel said, "since, usually, the only authority present is yourself."

"I only execute people if there is a preponderance of evidence, and after—oh, to Jupiter's nose with it. Subprefect Markus?"

"Sir?"

"There will be no executions today. You have my word on it."

"Umm." Markus cast a glance at Lionel.

"Take it, kid. That's the best you can hope for."

"Thank you, Tribune. Welcome aboard the Moose Jaw."

"Moose have jaws?" Devin asked. "Or Meese? What's the plural? And aren't they aquatic? Don't they gum their food?"

"I'm sure the tribune is correct."

"That's a whale, the gumming thing," Lionel said.

"You sure?"

"Positive."

"What's a moose, then?"

"No idea. But it's a traditional name for a corvette-class warship."

"Well, if it's tradition, then I'm in favor of it. Subprefect Markus, do you know why the Moose Jaw was sent here?"

Markus started sweating again.

"Uh, the needs of the Empire, Tribune?"

"That's what they told you?"

"Well..."

"They didn't mention you having one too many drinks and calling Admiral Makatoni a... Lionel?"

"Incompetent, time-serving lickspittle with a penchant for embezzlement," Lionel said. "Who wasn't worth a pitcher of warm spit? I liked lickspittle. I had to look that up. And I've heard you didn't say spit."

"Time-serving lickspittle," Devin said. "No mention was made of that?"

Sweat appeared on Markus's brow.

"Not directly, sir. There were some private discussions afterward."

"Did you know that Admiral Makatoni was my second cousin, once-removed, Markus?"

"I did not, sir."

"You know what I think about people who call my cousin that?"

"No, sir."

"I think they have excellent judgment. He was an Imperial turd when we played together as kids, and I'm sure he hasn't changed. Anyone who can tell him that to his face is okay with me. We're going to get along just fine." Devin put his arm around the subcommander. "Take me around and show me your ship."

The tour took four hours. Lionel and Steward Imin roamed the ship, while Devin insisted on having every weapon system inspected, and even took part in the dropping of a test antimissile boat proximity mine, citing nostalgia. He claimed his first posting had been as officer in charge of that system.

"I'm sure you were an excellent antimissile officer, sir," Markus said, accepting a drink from Imin in the tribune's cabin.

He was seated in the lounge, with Devin and Lionel facing him and Imin serving.

"I was a worthless ass. Until I learned to let the petty officer do all the drills. Efficiency doubled after that. That's a lesson I'll never forget." Devin took a drink. "Your lack of diplomacy non-withstanding. Your crew seems talented and cheerful."

"Thank you, sir."

"Which is fake, of course. You staged the whole thing for the visiting Tribune. Lionel? You were snooping around while I was posturing. What's the truth?"

"Some good people, mostly, Tribune," Lionel said. "Enthusiastic but very, very inexperienced. I wandered through engineering. Atmospheric cleaning system is running at ten percent efficiency. They don't have the settings tuned right. And one of the missile control boards was installed backward."

"What would be the result of that? If they fired one, I mean."

"Either the missiles might not launch at all, or they might launch and home back in on the launching ship. Not sure. We'll find out when they launch."

Devin took another swig. "You might want to fix that, Subprefect."

"Yes, sir," Markus said. "Sorry, sir."

"Are they salvageable? The crew I mean?" Devin asked.

"Mostly," Lionel said. "They need time. Any really hard cases?"

"Four," Imin said. "Subprefect Markus had four men waiting in an air lock, jammed on the inside. He had a guard there to keep them from getting out."

"Perhaps they were getting ready to perform necessary external maintenance," Devin said.

"In which case, Tribune, they would have had on skinsuits. Which

they didn't."

"Sounds more like a threat to me," Devin said. He swirled his drink. "Subprefect, why did you have four men imprisoned in an air lock?"

Markus's brow was covered with sweat. "We needed—I needed, the crew..." He gulped his drink and sat it on the table. "Tribune. I was sent out-system with six hours' notice. After the... incident... at the diplomatic gathering, I was hauled into the fleet admiral's office the next day. I was told I'd be court martialed and to consider myself under arrest. I returned to my ship and got an official notification of the court martial a few minutes later, but an hour after that, I got priority orders to proceed out-system immediately."

"Priority orders? I'm sure your commander could have countermanded them."

"They were signed by the palace, Tribune."

"Is that a fact?" Devin didn't seem surprised. "Hard to countermand, Imperial orders. And your crew?"

"The admiral couldn't cancel the orders, but he could strip my crew. He pulled every experienced spaceman he could put his hands on and replaced them with whatever he could find in a hurry. Inexperienced ratings who were just out of basic training, discipline problems. The irredeemably stupid. He took my experienced chiefs and gave me the problem children. And the four horsemen."

"The four horsemen?"

"The four in the air lock. Long-service ratings. Thieves. Malingerers. Bad leaders. I've had my hands full, keeping an eye on them. They don't do any work, and I'd be better off without them. If I'd not had them hidden, they would have started all sorts of problems during your inspection."

"They appear to have caused you problems, regardless," Devin said.

"Yes, Tribune."

"Well, you're not here because of your lack of discretion, Commander—well, not entirely because of it. We also have need of your more military services. I have a... friend... in the naval hierarchy who keeps an eye out for efficient captains who are more interested in launching their mines than polishing their medals. You come well recommended. You opened your sealed orders when you entered the sector?"

"Yes, sir, I'm to suppress smuggling in this sector. In particular, I'm to pay attention to arm shipments into the demilitarized areas as mandated in the recent Imperial-Confederation-Union of Nations concord."

"You understand your orders, Subprefect?"

"I do, sir. I will extend all my efforts in suppressing piracy and smuggling."

“You will do no such thing. Imin, another round, please.”

Devin waited till Imin had filled their glasses, then nodded at Markus. “You have questions, Subprefect?”

“I don’t understand your orders, sir.”

“Pirates, you can suppress that all you want. Hang ’em all. smugglers. That’s a different story. I’ll be giving you a list of... personages we’re interested in finding. If you come across these people, we want you to... Well, it’s complicated. Some, we want apprehended and brought back. Unhurt. Others, we want you to watch and report. Some, we want... removed. But only if they are alone. If there are others near them, it’s complicated. There are some groups we want supported. Others, we do not. And circumstances will change. You’ll have to make some judgments. We’ll be giving you a pile of intelligence briefings.”

“Will there be a test after, sir? Because I’m not very good with tests.”

Devin laughed so much he spilled his drink. “There will be a test. The smugglers and pirates will administer it. This will be an excellent opportunity to train your crew. You got four shifts with us here. Lionel will arrange to have experienced chiefs and ratings go over your systems and tune and repair what we can. They’ll also set up a training program for your people. All Imperial ships have training materials. Choosing which ones to study is the problem. Lionel will take care of that, won’t you, Subprefect?”

“No problem, Tribune.”

Markus smiled. “That would be wonderful. Thank you, sir.” He sipped his new drink. “That gives me a start on most of my problems, the break I need. They’re mostly good kids. They just need experience.”

“We’ll give them that,” Devin said.

“And I can figure out something to do with the four horsemen. They’re a drag on morale.”

“Don’t worry about them,” Devin said. “Transfer them to me. I’ll take care of them. Lionel, assign them to the Boson. Tell him that the floggings will continue till their morale improves.”

“I love that expression,” Markus said.

“What expression?” Devin asked.

“The flogging will continue until morale improves.”

“That’s an expression? What type?”

“Well, it means—I mean, it just means that we’ll, you know, do things. Watch them. We won’t actually flog them.” Markus looked around the room. “It’s just an expression. There isn’t actually any flogging, is there?”

Devin looked at Lionel. Lionel shrugged. “Different ships have

different rules, Tribune. Others don't flog people."

"Really?" Devin said. "No floggings?"

"Really," Lionel said.

"On my ship," Devin said, "on my ship. That's not an expression. It's literal. The bosun knows how to deal with the likes of those." He stood, as did the others. "Drink up, Subprefect. We'll fix your ship, then I want you out there catching pirates. Smugglers. And any other threats to the Empire."

Chapter Six

“Pilot,” Lee said. “Cheong confirmed. He said dock at the transit locks. There won’t be any inspections there. We can dock and meet him to discuss ‘items of mutual interest.’”

The Heart’s Desire, operating under their fake ID of Heavyweight Items, was gliding in on a ballistic approach to Jaytee.

Lee mirrored her display onto the other screens. “Cargo-13 is where we’re going. It’s the biggest station, has over a hundred docks.”

Dirk highlighted other dots on his screen. “What are these others?”

“More stations. Cargo-Sixty, Transfer-Six, Passenger-One, and Passenger-Two. The bigger green dots are container farms.”

“Big place,” Dirk said. “Ana, what do you and your team see nearby?”

Ana slouched in the chair behind Dirk. Rocky had crept up the bridge and climbed onto Ana’s lap. Ana rubbed his belly and paged through his own displays. “Team? I like that. Private, Nature Girl, talk us in.”

Dena occupied the fourth chair in the control room. Scruggs stood behind, whispering in her ear. “There’s lots. What do you want first?”

“Always start with the most dangerous,” Ana said. “The biggest threat.”

“How do I know which is the biggest threat?” Dena asked. “You mean the biggest ship?”

“Start with the armed ships, from closest to us to farthest. Later, we’ll show you how to calculate ones that can close fastest.”

“Right, there’re four armed merchant ships hanging out at the container farms. Each one carries at least a hundred containers. One has space for over two hundred.”

“How do you know they’re armed?”

Scruggs and Dena exchanged more whispers. “We don’t, but the database says they normally carry weapons. We could do a visual scan when we’re close enough.”

“Do it. And the others?”

“Centurion,” Scruggs said, “there’s at least a hundred other merchant ships here. Some as small as us but mostly those huge bulk carriers.”

“You’re missing something,” Ana said. “That’s merchant ships. What about local forces? Are there any customs boats, things like that?”

Scruggs and Dena went “Ooohhh” and tapped their screens. The bridge was silent.

Ana paged through his own screens. “That’s interesting.”

“Here you go, Centurion,” Dena said. “There’re ten of these cutter-sized things zipping on screen. Smaller than us but armed. Their beacon says system defense.”

“Did you just call me Centurion?” Ana asked. “Are you sick?”

Dena jerked her head from the screen. “Must be. Don’t get used to it, old man.”

“Noted,” Ana said. “Lots of security. Too many ships to count. Armed merchant ships. Unarmed merchant ships. Lots of activity. No chance of getting away from the shooting. Is that it?”

“That’s it, old man,” Dena said.

“Well, as a sensor tech, you make a good fire starter,” Ana said. “But everyone starts somewhere. I’m going to put a ship on your screen. Private, do not scan this ship. It’s military. Navy, tell me what you see.” Ana echoed a ship on everyone’s display.

“Military.” Dirk tapped his screen. “Too far away to tell what type but some type of small warship from the scale.”

“It’s just a blob,” Scruggs said. “And it’s far out. How can you be sure it’s military?”

“The orbit,” Dirk said. “Merchant ships are always either heading outbound to the jump limit, heading inbound from the jump limit, or close to a station somewhere. No reason to do anything else. That ship is outside of the jump limit, and it’s cruising along. In fact, if Centurion will extend the orbit, he, no doubt, has on his screen, I can see...” All the screens changed as Ana added the orbit. “It won’t be inside the jump limit of any planet for the foreseeable future. It can keep an eye on the whole system from there, and if anything odd happens, it can jump out right away.”

“That’s cool,” Scruggs said. “Thank you, Centurion. I’ll know next time.”

Dirk laughed. “What?” Scruggs said.

“Show her the rest, Centurion,” Dirk said. Ana added two other orbits to the screen. “Three ships, two together, one alone. Two Confeds, one Imperial?”

“That’s what the beacons say,” Ana agreed. “They are broadcasting, all fat dumb and happy. But I notice they give each other lots of room.”

“Cutters inside the jump limit. Warships outside,” Dirk said. “Great start to our day.”

***

Most of a shift later, Heart’s Desire latched onto a truss sticking out

from the main station. Gavin clamped magnets on from engineering, then climbed up the central ladder to the main air lock. The group milled around when they all suited up. Ana, Dirk, and Scruggs had revolvers in holsters. Dena had her slingshot. Lee and Gavin had mesh carry backpacks.

"Guard the ship, Rocky," Scruggs said, bending over. "Good boy."

Rocky jumped up, licked her face, then trotted back to her room.

"What will he do while we're gone?" Gavin asked.

"Guard the den. Where we sleep and keep our food. Makes perfect sense to a dog," Scruggs said.

"One point," Dirk said, "our radios are Imperial models. They might not repeat properly inside. We'll have to use public comm channels." He sealed his helmet. "Everybody ready?"

"Ready," Scruggs said. "I just need a final check."

Each crew partnered off to check the others' suits. Scruggs checked Dena, Dena checked Scruggs, then Ana checked them both again.

"Don't trust me, old man?" Dena asked.

"Don't trust either of you," Ana said. "Or anyone else for that matter, but I'd be upset if Scruggs died on me after all the training I've put into her."

"Awwww, you old softie," Dena said. "You mean you'd miss me, too? That's why you checked me as well."

"Nope," Ana said. "If you died, Scruggs would feel bad. That would affect her operational readiness. I surely don't want that happening. She's the one I mistrust the least of the group." Ana swung into the air lock.

The two women lingered outside.

"Wow," Scruggs said. "He mistrusts me the least. That's pretty awesome, coming from him."

"Go team," Dena said.

***

The truss was long and fully exposed to vacuum. Dirk, Gavin, and Lee pushed off and flew down in a series of long swooshing dives. Ana led Dena and Scruggs down magboot step by magboot step until they were fifty feet from the major air lock, then dove with a flip in the middle.

Scruggs almost copied him but stumbled on her landing. Ana caught Dena before her head slammed into the hull of the station.

"Wow, you must mistrust me the second-most least," Dena said.

Ana grunted and snapped her to the station hull. "Well, the dog isn't here right now."

They crowded into the air lock.

"Small air lock for such a big station," Scruggs said.

“Air costs money. Gotta save it,” Gavin said. “Don’t lose much when you pop but always some. And you need a hole in your hull. Better lots of small air locks than one big one.”

They trooped inside and removed their helmets and strapped them on their backs.

Dirk stripped off his gloves and tapped his comm. “Right, Engineer and Medic, get your respective supplies, as we discussed. Lee?”

“They have my list at the store, Pilot, but I think I can... find a discount.”

“You mean convince somebody to steal some from the clinic and sell it to you cheap?” Ana asked.

“Not your affair, Centurion,” Dirk said. “Medic is in charge of getting her supplies. How she does it is her business, not yours. Understood?”

“Understood, Navy.”

“Gavin, any questions about your budget?” Dirk asked.

“None, Skipper. But we do need those control circuits soon.”

“We need money more. And bring back only what you can carry, at least until we find out what our situation is vis-a-vis Cheong. If we have to leave in a hurry, I don’t want things that we paid for sitting here.”

“Got it,” Gavin said.

He and Lee took off down a corridor.

“I thought our situation is that he owes us money and is going to pay it,” Dena said.

“Got your slingshot?” Dirk asked her.

“Always,” Dena said, patting an outer pocket. “What am I going to do with it?”

“Station security might arrest us for firing a weapon that can damage electronics or pierce a hull, but they’ll just laugh if you break his arm with a rock.”

“How will I know to use it?”

“If he starts lying to us about payment.”

“How will I know if he’s lying to us?”

“His mouth will be moving. Let’s go.”

***

The station was big enough that it took Dirk and his group twenty minutes to walk to the café, where Cheong had set up the meeting. The café was rectangular, dark, and took up the entire width of an outer ring. The group entered via the spinward door and stopped under the entrance lights.

Dim booths lined both walls, and two rows of tables stretched between them. The antispinward end was invisible. The room was

long enough that it disappeared into darkness beyond the station curve. A fake electric candle sat on each table, throwing soft red light onto the dark wood grain table top. Four large globular lamps were set at intervals along the ceiling, providing enough light to tell tables from chairs but not much else. The floor was checkered, red-and-black with squares.

Most tables and booths were occupied, but it was so dark it was hard to tell if the occupants were men or women.

"Dark wood, red lights," Dena said. "Is this a business meeting or a date?"

"I think they're the same with Cheong," Ana said. "Anybody who does business with him is eventually going to get—"

TINK.

Scruggs tapped the hostess station. "Metal. Looks like wood, but it's fake. Everything here is a lie."

"Must be Cheong's favorite place, then," Dirk said.

A dazzling yellow shirt appeared from the dark. "Hey there, Sporto! Over here. Long live the Emperor! Welcome." Cheong had seized a large booth in the far corner. He faced the door. A dark-haired woman sat next to him. He waved them over.

The restaurant quieted at the Imperial greeting. Dirk grimaced, led the group over, and stood by the table. "Cheong, you ass, do you have to tell everybody that we're from the Empire?"

Cheong frowned. "Kind of grumpy there, Sporto. That's no way to greet a long-lost friend." He held out his arms. "Give Cheong a hug!"

"Stop calling me Sporto," Dirk said. "We're not happy with you."

"But we're old friends," Cheong said.

"No, we are not," Ana said. "Lady, you have to move."

"I don't believe we've been introduced," the black-haired woman behind Cheong said.

"We haven't. Get up and move to the other side of the booth."

"What if I don't want to?" she asked.

Ana reached over and grabbed Cheong's arm. "We'll find a different table. Private?"

"Four by the door, Centurion," Scruggs said. She had her back to the group. "Saw them as we came in."

"There might be another on the far side, at the back. You and Nature Girl over there." Ana nodded to an adjacent table. "If anybody comes at us, screen her while she loads. If those tables get up, block them while she knocks them down. No firearms, just the slingshot—unless they shoot first."

"Knocks who down?" Cheong said. "We're all friends here."

Ana dragged Cheong to the next table, shoved him to the wall, and sat next to him, stopping him from leaving. "I've got some questions

about videos from your old place of business, but that can wait. Want to tell us why our ship load of medical supplies turned out to be a shipload of ammunition instead?"

"You have my ammunition?" the woman said. "Good. All hundred cases."

"Your ammunition?" Dirk said. He slid into the booth across from Cheong. "Just who would you be?"

"I'm the one who's paying for a hundred cases of ammunition," she said.

"You have a name?"

"You can call me Kayi Androm," she said. "Or just Kay because we're friends, like Cheong said."

"Good friends," Cheong said. "You know, Sporto, your buddy here, he has a revolver pressed into my waist."

"More at the level of your lungs," Ana said. "Better chance of you dying quickly if I have to shoot you."

"That seems a little extreme," Kay said.

"Not really," Ana said. "Got to save ammunition. It's expensive. Have to buy it, pay somebody to bring it to you, and speaking of that..."

"I'm sure we can come to a reasonable arrangement," Dirk said. "We had originally agreed to transport a few containers of medical supplies, which we assumed probably had some documentation irregularities. But we were willing to take that chance with medical stuff. The authorities don't get as worked up about stolen bandages as they do about stolen revolvers."

"They're not stolen," Cheong said. "I have all the paperwork."

"Of course you do," Dirk said. "But that's not what we contracted to carry. So, we're here to discuss payment. You do have the payment, don't you?"

"Of course, of course," Cheong said.

"And it's in your pocket? Strapped to your belt, perhaps?" Dirk said.

"Well, there's an issue." Cheong squirmed. "Ouch, that hurts." Ana had jabbed him with the revolver. "Don't stick me with that."

"Don't move, and I won't have to."

"Where's our money?" Dirk said.

"As Cheong said, there is a complication," Kay said, reaching for her pocket.

Ana swung the revolver under the table. "You keep still as well."

Somebody shouted from the entrance.

"Centurion," Scruggs called from behind them. "Movement."

"Take 'em down," Ana said. His revolver moved to point at Cheong. "Whatever happens next happens to you first."

Scruggs ran from the table, charging the oncoming man. Dena slid out of the booth. Her slingshot twanged. The running man screamed as his leg buckled under him and stumbled into a nearby table. Scruggs grabbed a chair and tossed it. The next man tripped over it. Scruggs snatched another chair.

Kay yelled, “STOP. No weapons.” The two trailing men paused. “These four are with me. We need to finish our business here.”

One of the rushing people, the woman, had her own revolver in her hand but pointed at the ceiling. The other man had jumped over his prone colleagues but stopped in the face of Dena’s cocked slingshot.

“Stop right there, buddy,” Dena said.

“What’s that?”

“Slingshot.”

“I’m not scared of that.”

“Your friend’s leg is broken.”

“Lucky shot.”

“You sure?” Dena aimed at his crotch. “Let’s see if my luck holds.”

“All of you, back off,” Kay yelled. “Check Gio, then wait by the door.”

“Yes, ma’am,” the lead one said.

The three dragged their groaning colleague back. Scruggs dropped the chair, and Dena unstretched her sling shot.

“Well, that was fun,” Ana said. “And thanks for your help, Navy, as usual.”

“Our female guest has a revolver jammed into my hip,” Dirk said. “I thought it best to keep still.”

Kay’s hand appeared from below the table, a matte black revolver nestled in her palm.

“Small weapon,” Ana said. “Short barrel, not very accurate.”

“Sufficiently accurate at six inches,” Kay said. “And I have small hands. I need something I can hold.”

“Very dexterous, small hands,” Dirk said. “But, to the matter at hand, how are you going to pay for your ammunition?”

“There is a little problem,” Cheong said. “Very tiny.”

“I don’t like problems,” Ana said. “I tend to try to eliminate them. You don’t want to be on my problem list. Or my elimination list. Same list, really.”

“It’s not mine, I told you. It’s hers. She’s the problem. She won’t pay me.”

Ana and Dirk swiveled to look at Kay.

“You don’t want to be a problem, either,” Ana said. “But I can understand you being worried about doing business with Sporto here. We’re much more reliable. And we have your goods. You can pay us directly, collect your items, and we’ll be on our way.”

“I’m not paying, either,” Kay said.

“Did I mention my problem talk?” Ana said. “I thought I did, the bit about removing them?”

“Shoot me, and you won’t get paid,” Kay said. “I don’t care if I am a problem. In fact, I’m glad I’m a problem because I have problems of my own. Maybe you can help solve my problems, and I’ll solve yours.”

“We’re not in the problem-solving business,” Ana said.

“You wanted to shoot Cheong,” Kay said.

“I do, but that’s more of an elimination than a solution. And also, more of a personal hobby thing.”

“Fine, shoot him, and we’ll talk if that makes you happy,” Kay said. “Will this take long?”

“Whoa, hang on a moment there, Missy,” Cheong said. “Let’s not have any of this talk about shooting me.”

“I would enjoy that,” Ana said. “Brighten up my day.”

“Why would you shoot me?” Cheong asked. “What have I ever done to you?”

“You call me Sporto, for one thing,” Ana said.

“And that’s grounds for execution?” Cheong said. “I call everybody Sporto.”

“And everybody hates you for it,” Kay said.

“I call you Missy, and you never complained.”

“It’s on my list. Listen, the two of you have my hundred crates of ammo on your ship?”

“Our well-guarded ship—yes, we do,” Dirk said. “And it’s more like a hundred sixty crates.”

Kay raised her eyebrows. “What’s in the extra crates?”

Cheong coughed. “I got a line on some grenades. It wasn’t in the original quote, of course, so there would be an extra charge.”

“I don’t think so,” Kay said. “How much was this one going to pay you?”

“Twenty-five thousand credits,” Dirk said.

“No, he wasn’t,” Kay said.

“No, I wasn’t,” Cheong said. Everyone stared at him. “What? I meant she was.”

Dirk leaned over and used his fingers to close Cheong’s mouth. “You need to be quiet now.”

“Centurion,” Scruggs yelled, “security coming in the corridor. Six, at least.”

Kay stood. “Hold them for five minutes,” she called to her group.

Three faced the far door, the fourth limping away.

“But I don’t care,” Kay said. “I’ll pay you fifty thousand credits for all that you’ve got. On one condition—you deliver them somewhere else.”

“Where else?” Dirk asked.

BOOM.

A shotgun fired, and a ceiling light shattered.

“To a war,” Kay said, sliding out of the booth. “I need them delivered to a war.

Chapter Seven

“Engineer,” Lee said. “This will go faster if we split up.” She and Gavin had climbed down the stairs from the docking level to the third ring, planning their errands. “Your shops are one-quarter spinward, but mine are in the opposite direction.”

“You need some private time?” Gavin asked.

“It gets tiring always being around the same people,” Lee said.

“Pilot will complain,” Gavin said.

“And you always do everything the pilot says?” Lee asked.

“Never. Besides, they’ll be some time prying money out of that Cheong character if the past is anything to go by. And we’ve got comms. I could use an hour without Ana’s ugly mug staring at me. We passed a snack bar one ring up, the breakfast place. We can meet there in two hours.”

“Two hours, it is,” Lee said, waving and walking away.

Gavin leaned against the corridor wall, checking his part lists, paging through specifications. He watched Lee out of the corner of his eye until she disappeared past the curve of the station. He counted to sixty, and when she didn’t reappear, he turned and raced up the stairs and got off at the next ring.

An electronics store faced the stairs, with the latest in comms, displays, and portable electronics. He marched in and made a beeline to the checkout counter.

He paid a bored clerk a single twenty credit chip for sixteen credits’ worth of generic message chips, ignoring her offer of change—it was in station credits, and he would have had to produce an ID if he wanted it.

Running back down the steps, he jogged spinward through the corridors. He fumbled a fresh message chip in as he ran, then ducked into the alcove at the next set of stairs. A group was coming down, so he slid to the right and climbed, listening as they bounced off the bottom. At the first landing, he paused. When he couldn’t hear any boots ringing off the steel steps, he set it to record a message.

“Gavin Crewjacki,” he said, “Two-four-one-oh-two-four-one. Papa-India-Zulu-Zulu-Alpha. Strep’s Ship Emporium, third level.” He ended the recording, played it back, then slipped it in his pocket.

As he returned to the corridor, he popped earphones in his ears, turned on music, and jogged along the ring. It took him ten minutes to reach the opposite direction from where he had climbed the stairs

with Lee. He passed Strep's Ship emporium on the way but didn't slow. Two hundred meters past that, at a numbered door, he checked both ways and walked inside to a secured waiting room that had four metal chairs and metal walls, opposite an armored glass window. He rang the bell.

Nothing happened for the next thirty seconds, so he rang the bell again. After another thirty, he held the button down. Twenty seconds after that, a uniformed figure appeared behind the counter.

"You must be pretty stupid if you think that will get you better service. Whatever you want to file, we're not taking those today."

"Give this to the local military intelligence officer," Gavin said. He put the message chip into the sliding tray.

"This is Confederation customs. There are no military officers here. And whatever paperwork you were going to file, we'll look at it in a week or so. Maybe."

"It's important," Gavin said. "Take it."

The Confederation customs officer pulled the tray inside, picked up the chip, rolled it between his fingers, then tossed it into a trash slot. "Taken. Now, go away."

Gavin pressed his nose to the window. "I can read your nametag, Officer Simms. And I'll remember that name. And the date. Don't be surprised if somebody important asks to see today's video from inside the office someday in the future."

Gavin stepped back. "Free trades."

The officer crossed his arms and glared at him. Gavin exited the foyer, pulling the door closed behind him. He stopped in the hallway, cocked his head, and grinned when a trash can lid clashed behind the door.

***

Lee arrived at the medical supply store and browsed. Mixed items decorated the shelves. Controlled drugs were visible behind the counter. The medical salesman was a Jovian. Lee browsed till she was the only customer present, then walked up to the counter.

"Hello, sister," he said.

"The peace of Zeus upon you, brother," Lee said. She held her right hand up, palm forward, two first fingers extended, the rest crossed.

The man blinked, then bowed. "And to you, sister. How may we help you?"

Lee tapped her comm and sent her list to an order cube in front of him. "Do you have these supplies?"

The Jovian glanced at it. "This is no problem. It's all on the shelves behind you."

"Good, I will need those, and there's another matter."

The man nodded.

The shop was still empty. “There’s an Imperial warrant out for me. You will have received a copy.”

The man’s eyes widened. “Why are you telling me this?”

“There will be instructions, special instructions with it. If you do not know of them, speak to your clan leader on station. Show them my picture. They’ll know what to do.”

“Okay,” the man said.

“My ship is called Heavyweight Items. We are on a docking truss.” Lee gave him info on which truss to locate them. “It is important to track who arrives on the ship and where we are heading. We may leave at any time, speak to your clan leader without delay. Without delay, do you understand, brother?”

“I do, sister. Right away.”

“One other thing.”

“Yes, sister?”

Lee pulled a handful of credit chips from her pocket and put them on the counter. “I will need a fifty percent discount on these supplies.” She arranged the credit chips in piles. “At least fifty percent.”

***

Gavin put his pile of parts on the counter. They were mostly small electrical parts without boxes. “I’ll take these. Can you put them in a bag for me?” He slid a credit chip across the counter.

“Sure,” the clerk said. “Did you find everything you needed?”

“I still need a reverse back-threaded clapper valve,” Gavin said.

“If that’s a plumbing thing, I’ve never heard of it,” she said. “Which is kind of odd. I’ve been here long enough to have heard everything.”

“That’s what I call it,” Gavin said. “I don’t know the formal designation. It’s a part of a standard water evaporation system.”

“Do you have a picture?” she asked.

“Should have but no. Do you have any recycled or used plumbing systems? I could look through to see if you have some?”

“Through that door over there,” the clerk said. “Be my guest. Do you want these delivered to the... Heavyweight Items? We can have somebody meet you at the base of the truss.”

“Just ring ’em up while I browse. Thanks,” Gavin said. “I’ll carry them out.” He left his parts on the counter and walked into the other room.

Piles of pipes and fittings lined the wall. Gavin picked a standard one-way valve off a shelf and held it, then walked along the aisles, making sure to clank pipes together from time to time.

After three minutes, a woman in a plain coverall came into the back room and walked down the aisle.

“That’s a back-threaded clapper valve?” she asked.

“How should I know?” Gavin asked. “You got my message. Can you find my ship?”

“What message? What ship?” the woman asked. “I have no idea.”

“I don’t have time for this,” Gavin said. “Listen up. We’re packed full of ammunition we stole from a Confederation depot. We’re dropping it off here for a guy named Cheong. I don’t think you’ll want it to go where it’s going.”

“Where’s it going?”

“Now you’re interested? What happened to ‘what message?’”

“We know Cheong,” the woman said. “We don’t know you. And we haven’t heard of any theft of ammunition.”

“You wouldn’t tell me if you did.”

“You look like your picture.”

“That’s because I’m me. You might want to track our ship as we leave.”

“We might just do that,” the woman said. “But Cheong usually works for us. When we don’t want to get directly involved.”

“Guess you’re not keeping him busy enough,” Gavin said. “I have to go. Check for the theft.”

“Sure will. We’ll see you soon,” she said.

“Bring money next time,” Gavin said. “I’m back in business now.”

***

“Station security,” a voice yelled into the restaurant. “Everyone, stay where you are.”

Ana hopped out of the booth. “Scruggs, no weapons. Dena, take out the lights. Smash ’em.”

Dena shot out the light closest to the door. It sizzled, then arced. Then all the lights, including the fake candles, died. The only light came from the corridors in the distance.

Voices yelled in the darkness as the patrons ran in all directions.

A figure came at Ana. He stood and swung a fist, smacking the person down. Another bumped into his back and made him stumble.

“I’ll be going now,” Cheong said, sliding by. “Good hunting and—hey!”

Ana grabbed Cheong’s ear and pressed his revolver into it. “Come along with us. Now.” He hauled him back into the dark.

“You’re ripping my ear off,” Cheong said.

“No, he’s not,” Dirk said, following. “That’s why it still hurts.”

“Stop it hurting.”

“Want me to get a knife and cut it off?” Ana said. “Then it won’t hurt anymore.”

“Changed my mind,” Cheong said. “Hurting is fine.”

“With me,” Kay said. “To their ship. Flip the tables.”

A table clattered as one of her men threw them over.

“Do not come to our ship,” Dirk said. “We’re not a bus.”

“Want to get paid?” Kay asked, jogging by.

“Emperor’s anus. Follow me to Dirk’s bus lines, then.” Dirk flipped a table and shoved it back into the gloom.

The couple cowering underneath yelled.

“Sorry, needed that.”

The room flashed bright as a shotgun fired past them. Clumps of dust dropped as the round disintegrated on the ceiling.

Scruggs and Dena ran by.

“Centurion?” Scruggs said.

“Go, go, go,” Ana said, yanking a howling Cheong along. “I’m bringing this one along to have a chat later.”

Scruggs ran ahead and rolled another table with Dirk’s help. Dena ran three steps, stopped, and fired a pellet behind them. Ana continued to drag a resisting Cheong along, and the others ran. The shotgun flashed again, and Scruggs pitched down, dust billowing from her back. She slammed chest-first to the floor and lay there, unmoving.

Dena and Dirk didn’t hear, and the yelling carried on.

Ana flung Cheong to the side and dropped next to her. “Scruggs? Private? Answer me.” He checked her.

She was breathing, but her face was covered in blood, and she was out cold.

Kay dropped next to Ana. “How bad?”

“Not sure.” Ana rolled her over and flipped her eyelids. “She’s completely out.”

“No time,” Kay said. “Bogatkina. Fire at the roof. Don’t hit anybody.”

The room flashed again as one of Kay’s troopers fired. This round tinged off the ceiling and didn’t explode. Regular projectile, not frangibles.

“Keep them off me,” Kay yelled. She rolled Scruggs on her back, grabbed the far arm, and threw her over her shoulder in a fireman’s carry. “Well, which way is your ship?”

***

Gavin continued his fake jogging along the corridor. He stopped to check his comm, then continued to a set of stairs and climbed up to a regular docking bay. One of the large container ships Scruggs and Dena had identified was docked there, with a uniformed crew member standing guard at the lock. Gavin stopped at the top of the stairs, pushed another message chip into his comm, and recorded a quick

message. He checked it, then walked up to the guard. Another had joined him with a shock stick in his hand.

Gavin stopped a few feet away. “National registered ship Clementine?”

“Who wants to know?” the guard with the shock stick asked.

The other was talking into their comm and watching Gavin.

“Here”—Gavin threw a message chip at them—“give this to your gunner or whoever buys the ammunition for your sandcaster.”

“Captain’s in charge of that, friend,” the shock stick man said.

“Then, give it to him.”

“Wait here,” the shock stick man said.

“No thanks,” Gavin said. “Places to go.” He walked away, then ran when the yelling started.

Chapter Eight

Lee stopped at the breakfast snack bar across from the stairs on Ring 4. The snack bar was a counter with a list of food items on the wall next to it. There were no chairs, just small counters where you could put your food. It was no different from eating on the ship, except standing. She paid for a metal cup and a hot, sweet lemon drink.

"This real lemon juice?" Lee asked.

"At that price?" the man shook his head. "Lemon-flavored basic. Extra sugar."

Lee sipped. "It tastes okay. Warm, at least." She walked to the outer bar and looked at the corridors.

The café was empty except for her—the shift change rush was over, but the corridors were busy with walking traffic. One of the main stairs bisected Ring 4 here. The stairs led outward, which was down to her, to the main cargo and truss connections. Dozens of ships occupied loading ports or clamped to the docking trusses sticking farther out, and groups of crew climbed up and headed deeper into the station on errands.

The main ring walkway stretched into the distance spinward and antispinward. Since the ring was curved, the floor climbed up in both directions. From her perspective, she was at the bottom of a bowl stretching away left and right, with stairs leading across the hall.

The counterman appeared next to her and sat a refill jug down. "Want a shot of whiskey in that?" He hefted a bottle. "Two credits."

"At this time of day?"

"Station operates twenty-four hours," the man said. "Always somebody getting off shift."

"It can't be real whiskey," Lee said.

"It isn't. We just call it that. It is alcohol, though. And the sugar blocks the taste."

"So, I'd be drinking sugar-flavored alcohol, then."

"The best on the station," the man said. "I thought I knew all the Jovians on station. You're new. Are you part of Clinton's clan?"

"No. Just passing through." A bell rang. "What's that noise?"

"Station security called an alert. A fight, usually. Let me check." He punched his comm. "Big fight. Weapons, in one of the cafes. A dozen people involved. That's bigger than normal."

Lee sipped her tea. A clattering noise came from her left.

Gavin raced by, heading spinward. He saw Lee, stopped, and grabbed the table, gasping. “Problems, back to the ship. Set us up to drop. I’ll lead them away, then dive through an air lock. Let the others know. Can you pick me up?”

Lee nodded.

“Thanks, Lee. See you soon,” Gavin said, racing away.

“You know him?” the counterman asked.

“My engineer,” Lee said.

Two men in red-and-black ship coveralls appeared, chasing Gavin. One carried a shock stick. The other was talking into a comm. They paused at the intersection.

One looked at the counterman. “Which way?”

The counterman pointed after Gavin, and they raced off.

“Nationalists,” the counterman said. “I recognize the colors. They’re from one of the National ships.”

Lee’s comm beeped. She tapped it, but no channel came up, just the group warning beacon.

“Message?” the counterman asked.

“None of your concern,” Lee said. She downed her drink... “Thanks, but—”

Two women in blue uniforms passed, heading spinward, urgently talking in their comms. They paused at the intersection, spoke on the radio, then raced after Gavin and the Nationalists.

“Station security?” Lee asked.

“No, that’s Confed customs,” the counter man said. “Why are they here? They have no authority on this side of the station.”

“No idea,” Lee said, “I’ll be needing—”

Dirk and Dena raced by, going antispinward. They saw Lee and swerved to the counter. Dena loaded her slingshot and faced backward.

Dirk bent over and grabbed his knees. He took huge gasps till he could get his breath. “Navigator, thank the Emperor. Back to the ship. Drop right away. We’ll lead them away from the dock. Get outside, then you can pick us up. Where’s the engineer?”

“He’s running—”

“Errands. Call him. We’re leaving,” Dirk said, standing.

“Where’s Scruggs and Ana?” Lee said.

“They were behind us,” Dena said. She took a slug of Lee’s tea. “Bleah. Better put some booze in that, mask that ugly tea taste. Let’s go, Dirk.” She pulled him along as they ran antispinward.

The counterman watched them go. “Your friends are going the wrong way.”

“Well, I think they’re leading—Scruggs!” Lee yelled.

A woman Lee had never seen before stumbled to a stop in front of

Lee with an unconscious Scruggs draped over her shoulder.

"What happened," Lee said.

"No time," the woman said. "Your ship, Heart's Desire, where is it?"

"Our ship is Heavyweight Items—"

"No, it's not. The real name is Heart's Desire. Your centurion said to get her to the nearest air lock and onto your ship. His name is Ana, and he said to tell you 'Rocky hates Dirk. Smart dog.' That make sense to you?"

"Yes."

"Which way, then?"

Lee pointed up the stairs and described the truss and location.

"Free Trades," the woman said, then carried Scruggs up the stairs.

The counterman looked at Lee. "You some kind of criminal?"

"No, no," Lee said. "There must be some misunderstanding—"

BOOM.

Lee and the counterman ducked as a shotgun fired down the hall. Ana strode out of the dust and walked up to the bar, whistling.

"Good morning, Navigator. How's the drinks?"

Lee waved the dust away. "The lemon tea's good."

Ana picked hers up and drank. "Not bad for a station counter. Kay and Scruggs get by okay?"

"Is Kay the woman you told about Rocky, with Scruggs over her shoulder?"

"That's her. She's on her way to the ship. Our... cargo belongs to her."

"Is Scruggs okay?"

"Just a concussion. She's young, but we need to get her in a med unit. Did you see Navy and Nature Girl?"

"Running for the next air lock, going to climb out and jump. Why aren't they with you?"

"We got separated in the dark. Long story." Ana fired into the dust cloud again.

The frangible round spattered down the hallway and caused another plume.

"I do like these extra smoke frangibles," Ana said, loading more shells in the shotgun. "They're nonlethal like regular frangibles, but they smoke like nobody's business. Excellent concealment in a station."

"Where did you get the shotgun?"

"Took it off a fellow who wasn't using it correctly." Ana fired in the other direction, where more yells came from. "Station security fellow. They're calling in reinforcements. Nature Girl and Navy are getting ready to jump. Kay needs time to carry Scruggs on board. Where's Engineer? I can't raise him on comms."

"He's running for the ship, too. He was being chased by some Nats," Lee said.

"Nats? That's interesting."

"And some Confeds were chasing Gavin. Or the Nats. Or both of them."

"Outstanding." Ana fired again. Smoke billowed out along the hallway. "These get better and better. I have to get some of these. Navigator, if you've finished your tea, could you get back and get the ship ready to drop? I'll keep these security folks occupied while you set things up, then I'll run up and dive out an air lock myself."

Lee stood, but Ana stopped her with a hand on her shoulder. "You have a record of leaving people behind to be killed, which could happen this time. Nothing I can do, but Scruggs will be very unhappy with you."

Lee glared at him. "Why not come with me then, if you don't trust me."

"I don't trust you at all. But it's better for Scruggs and the others if I'm keeping everybody busy here."

"You think you can hold off two squads of security?" the counterman asked. "By yourself?"

Ana stepped away from the counter, sighted carefully antispinward, and fired. More dust scattered. "They're just security. They never get people who fight back. They're afraid of getting hurt. I'm not. Leaving now would be good, Navigator. And you, friend"—Ana pointed at the counterman—"should go hide in the back."

Lee drained her glass and vaulted the counter. The counter man gathered his jugs.

"Wait," Ana said. "Give me a glass of tea before you go."

The counter man hefted his jug.

"Is that whiskey?"

"Sure is."

"Give me some whiskey in my tea," Ana said. "Wait"—he picked up a cup and extended it—"never mind the tea, just whiskey."

***

"You'll be fine," Dirk said, checking Dena's skinsuit. "You've done this before."

"Running from a gunfight? Being shot at in the dark? Stealing weapons, chased by security? Theft, burglary, fighting, and general mayhem?"

"I meant jumping to a truss," Dirk said, sealing his helmet. "But I can't argue with the rest of it." He spun the wheel of the air lock, and they stepped in. He closed the door behind him and engaged the lock, yanking the outer door lever. This was a regular-use air lock, not an

emergency one, and the door's mechanical interlock prevented one door from being open without the other closed. "Dumping the air now."

The air vented, and Dirk swung the outer lock open and stepped out to the station's hull. "See the ship?"

Dena climbed out behind him. She used the door frame as a prop, stepping over the coaming. "No."

"You're looking down at the station. You need to look out at space."

"That's scary," Dena said.

"You weren't scared of being lost in the woods, shooting at wolves, and almost freezing to death?"

"They were dogs, not wolves. I wasn't ever lost. You were, and we weren't going to freeze to death with all that burnable wood."

"Seemed like it to me," Dirk said.

"I get your point," Dena said. "Knowledge conquers fear. Wow. That's pretty." She had turned her head up to view out. The primary was visible in the distance, climbing over the horizon of the planet below. "That is an amazing view."

"It is indeed," Dirk said. "Unfortunately"—he spun her ninety degrees to the trusses—"the ship is over there. See it?"

"Not really. There's a lot of ships out there."

"You see that sleek silver one, with the fins, the sculpted engine nozzles, that glassed-in control room, those gleaming docking magnets with the shiny silver chains?"

"Got it."

"That's absolutely not ours. See the one just above it?"

"Scraped paint, dented containers, and the heat shield looks like it was burned for three days?"

"That's us."

"Are all the landing struts bent?"

"Engineer tells us no structural issues."

"That splotch looks like it was eaten away with acid."

"Something about the salt in one of the rivers... it's cosmetic damage."

"And is the docking chain supposed to be... twisted like that?"

"Docking chain is expensive. We do what we can. Had to reuse some shorter lengths after we cut them."

"Total box of—"

"If you can find somebody else to take an unskilled thieving runaway as crew, be my guest."

"You took me as crew because you liked the way I looked in my dress, and you wanted to—"

"We don't have time for this now."

"We might. You aren't renowned for taking a long time."

Dirk crossed his arms.

"Sorry," Dena said. "I'm just nervous. Lift my chin, stare at where I want to land, and push?"

"In deep space, yes," Dirk said. "Here, we've got spin to complicate things. At this distance, pick a ship on... the next truss and one position up, point at that, drop your mags, and push."

"One over, one up, and push." Dena bent her knees, crouched, tapped a helmet button with her chin, looked up, then pushed off.

Dirk glided behind her, and they sailed serenely off into the black.

***

Gavin climbed up the truss. As soon as he exited the air lock, he climbed inside the framework. The inside was full of sharp steel flanges, power cables, fuel lines, comm cables, and heated water lines. He had to squirm past them and step carefully, or he would be stuck.

He stopped and stuck his head between two beams. The Heart's Desire was docked at the next truss over. Two suited figures, both women, glided from the station.

He watched their trajectory—given the spin and local conditions, they were on a single glide to the ship's air lock. One wore a shiny newish skinsuit—it looked like Scruggs's. The other had a military-style suit.

He stuck his torso out and looked up at the station. Two men in black-and-red Nationalist skinsuits had exited the air lock. They were looking at the ships but not in his direction.

"Scruggs," Gavin said over the line-of-sight radio. "What's wrong?"

Scruggs didn't move, but the woman gliding with her twisted and grabbed her in a hug and clashed helmets.

"Station calling Scruggs, say again," she said.

"Who are you?" Gavin asked.

"Who are you?" she countered.

"What's happened to Scruggs?"

The woman slow kicked and slow rolled in a circle. Then she kicked differently and pitched in full rotation. The two movements gave her a full three-sixty view. "I can't see you."

"That's the plan. What's going on?"

"She's hurt. I'm taking her to your ship. Your friends said meet us there."

Something flashed in the corner of his eye. Another group of two in Confederation skinsuits had exited the air lock, joining the Nats. They didn't clash helmets, but they were looking at each other.

Gavin cursed, ducked inside the truss, and climbed.

***

Lee exited the primary air lock and launched herself at the ship. She aimed for the dorsal air lock, visible above the truss. Two figures in skinsuits rolled ahead of her, obviously scoping out the area. She did a slow roll, and two other motions caught her eyes. Antispinward two figures pushed off the station, and their trajectory would take them close to the Heart's Desire, but they would miss it if they didn't adjust. Something was flashing in reflected sunlight spinward of her, inside of the spinward truss. She switched her radio to the common line of sight, calling channel, but it was already occupied.

"Just don't get in our way," voice one said.

"If we want to get in your way, we will, Nat. Just be lucky that we're not interested in you. We have our own business to conduct," voice two said.

Lee turned her microphone off but kept monitoring the channel.

The two figures ahead impacted the ship, but something was wrong. The first made a pinpoint landing but had to jump to catch the second. They stumbled and rocked on the ship, but her magboots held. They tromped over to the air lock and climbed in before Lee arrived.

Lee pivoted and hit next to the dock, bending her legs to keep there. She stepped to the air lock and entered. She climbed in, closed the outer lock, and pushed the button to fill the inner one. After ten seconds, it cleared enough that she could enter.

The inside of the ship smelled like oil, as it always did, reminding her to get better quality lubricants next stop. Rocky was barking somewhere below, and the woman wasn't visible.

Lee strapped her helmet to her belt, climbed up to the control room, and took the pilot's chair. They weren't chained to the station, only using magnets. She disengaged them and started the power-up sequence on the main engines. The main thrusters weren't online yet, but the low-energy ion drive was, so she gave a gentle push, and they floated away from the station, sliding out into the dark.

Chapter Nine

"Eat concrete, you cretins," Ana yelled, firing the shotgun again. Smoke puffed down the hall as the round impacted the wall. He sauntered down the corridor, coming to a cross connection. A man stuck his head out of the doorway ahead. The sign next to it said *Panther Trading*.

"You shooting at station security?"

"Shooting at anybody who comes down the corridor," Ana said. "Why are you asking? You want some of this?"

"No, no. I'm terrified and hiding behind the counter," the man said. "Least I am if anybody asks. Station security here is a bunch of tabbo droppings, in my opinion. Hassling people for no reason."

"Indeed," Ana said, "Why, I was just firing off my shotgun here, and they took exception."

"They do that," the man said.

"I'd like to go to truss sixty-three," Ana said.

He didn't, but his truss was next to that.

"Oh, you're all turned around. You've been heading away from it. It's back that way." He pointed back into the dust. "It's way back there. They're chasing you away from it."

"Sneaky," Ana said. "Like all security types."

"I'm not much fond of them myself," the man said. "You want to get to a specific truss. You can go outside and climb. Take the stairs. Not these ones. The next ones. They go right down to the last air lock. You can climb out from there."

"Thanks for the directions. That's kind of you. How come you're helping a wanted desperado?"

"You're not bothering me, unlike some I could name. Say, that's one of their special riot suppression ones. Frangibles. And the dust is a tear gas. How come you're not crying?"

Ana reversed the shotgun and sniffed it. "Doesn't smell like tear gas."

"After it explodes, it will. How did you get it?"

"Took it off a man who didn't know how to use it."

A bullet pinged out of the dust and bounced down the hall.

"See what I mean? No consideration, could have hit anybody."

Ana fired into the dust. "Only got one left. Gotta move on. Pleasure speaking to you."

"You as well," the man said. "Wish I could help some more. I hate

those guys."

Ana looked him up and down. "We're the same size and age. Maybe you pretend to be me?"

"I'm willing to try, but I don't think they'll buy it. Unless we have dust and so on."

"Is it really tear gas that explodes? These bullets, I mean."

"Sure. Regular riot control tear gas."

"You sure? Nothing lethal."

"If it was, given the number of times that they use it there would be bodies piling up everywhere."

"Outstanding," Ana said. "You ever in the army?"

"No, why?"

"I was. I was an instructor for a while. Brought hundreds of troops through training. Regular, advanced. I enjoyed it. Know my favorite spot?"

"The obstacle course?"

"Nope. Tear gas training. Did it a hundred times. Know something about tear gas?"

"I sense you're going to tell me."

"You can develop a tolerance to it," Ana said. He stepped right, put his hand on the wall, and fired the shotgun at the ground. The cloud of burning dark smoke rose. Ana's new friend hacked and dropped to the floor, rolling around and rubbing his eyes. Ana tossed the shotgun to the ground and pushed along the wall. "Free trades, friend."

***

"Emperor's hairy armpits," Gavin said.

Heart's Desire pushed away from the far truss. Lee pulsed the ion engines to drift them away. He keyed his microphone.

"Lee, what are you doing? We're still on the station. I need to get there."

"Stand by, Engineer. And stay off this channel. They can hear you."

"Lee," Dirk said over the radio, "don't move. We're on our way there. We've jumped. We're going to meetup with you."

"Not on that vector, you won't. Stay on course and stay off the channel. Lee out."

The Heart's Desire pitched up and spun as it cleared the docking posts.

Other voices came up, the two groups below yelling again.

Gavin ignored them and switched his attention to Dirk and Dena.

Dirk thrust a hand out to spin, then retracted it to slow, looking at the Heart's Desire edging away from the docking pole.

Dena tried to emulate him but gave too much hand movement and tumbled instead. Her feet smacked the back of Dirk's helmet, and the

two rolled. Their vector pointed them past the stern of the Heart's Desire.

Lee was backing the ship away from the dock. Once clear, she fired the thrusters and yawed the ship one hundred eighty degrees and held there, then she pitched slightly.

Dirk and Dena careened through space, still aiming to pass ahead of the ship. Dirk reached and snagged Dena's leg, stabilizing his roll, but his spin continued. They wheeled around their common center of balance but looked like they might clip the bow as they spun by.

Lee pulsed the main thrusters again, and the Heart's Desire leaped forward, right into Dirk and Dena's path. Dirk rolled and hit feetfirst. His boots magnetized and held, but Dena continued to spin. He leaned back, and her toes banged the ship, then she bounced off. Dirk grabbed her other arm and grasped her hands. She floated away, the two hanging by the air lock.

"Gavin, come to me now," Lee said.

"Coming." Gavin squirmed through the wires inside the truss. A forest of tiny lights sparkled on the ship ahead of Dirk.

"Skipper, shotgun pellets heading for you."

Dirk swung Dena down, trying to get her to lock on.

"Pilot, hang on tight."

"I'm not really—Imperial anus," Dirk said.

Lee rolled the ship. His boots held, but the spin forced him down. He dropped Dena and broke his fall with both hands, then grabbed her as she slammed face-first into the ship, pinned by the spin.

"You said this would be easy," Dena said.

"I lied," Dirk said. "Roll on your back, clamp on with the soles of your feet."

"Why, every time I go somewhere with a man he wants me on my back," Dena said. "Attached. What now?"

"Hang on and wait for Lee to stop showboating," Dirk said.

"I'm not showboating," Lee said. "Gavin, come out here now."

"I said I'm coming," Gavin said, climbing to stand on the truss. "I'm going to jump. Hold that aspect. Say, how did you get those Nats and Confeds off this channel?"

"Off the channel?" Lee said.

Gavin saw the Confed's shotgun pointing at him. He jumped and threw himself down and backward. He cursed as a pellet stung his calf. "They're listening. I'm airborne."

"You didn't jump at the ship," Lee said.

"I didn't get skewered by all those pellets, either," Gavin said. Lights flashed above him as he sailed behind the truss. "They're still firing, and they'll have a clear shot in ten seconds."

"Stand by," Lee said.

“Not much option,” Gavin said. “But I’d like to hear your plan.”

Gavin looked up. The station’s lights flashed from bright to dark as he sailed past the metal frame. The docking bay on the far side of the truss was empty. He’d be in clear view as he exited. He rotated his backpack over his head and dragged it across his chest. After pawing through, he pulled out the bottle of high-temperature lubricant he’d purchased at the emporium. Throwing the backpack clear would generate a vector change, and he could spray the lubricant like a mini rocket.

The shotgun didn’t hit him first. Lights flashed again and then darkened. Shadow loomed overhead as Lee shoved the ship along, adjusting to her speed.

She rolled, and Gavin saw the air lock open above, Dirk beckoning to him.

He pointed the lubricant, pushed the button, and jetted up and into Dirk’s hands.

***

Ana whistled as he climbed down the stairs. His friend had treated him well. The stairs ended at a personnel-only air lock, and he adjusted his helmet, cleared through the air lock, and clumped out onto the station. He left the outer door open, so the air lock was, for now, unusable.

The primary shone brightly. White clouds and blue oceans gleamed below. Dots of ships’ engines winked across his view.

He punched his radio. “Heavyweight Items, this is Ana.”

“Centurion,” Lee answered. “They can hear us on this channel.”

“Then, switch to a different one. We have a thousand on this radio.”

“We can’t. Those listening will know what we switch to and follow.”

“So, use a code,” Ana said.

“What type of code?”

Ana didn’t key the microphone for a moment.

“The difficult thing is,” Ana said, “the difficult thing is, they’re not that stupid overall. They think they are asking a legitimate question.” He keyed his mic. “There are shotguns there. Scruggs always uses the same one. I make her clean it every day. Go find it, check the serial number, and use the last three digits. Understood?”

“How will we know which shotgun is hers?”

“You could ask her.”

“She’s still out.”

“Oh.”

The outer air lock door was inching shut. He stepped back and tried

to hold it, but somebody inside had a hydraulic jack, grinding it closed. He had two more minutes before they locked it and put a crew inside.

"It will be the cleanest one." Ana keyed off, faced the air lock, and waited.

He switched channels to four-five-six, Scruggs's serial number. The air lock door snapped closed another inch. Ana searched for something metal to jam in the door. He'd left the shotgun in the station, and he'd lost his revolver when dealing with Scruggs. He examined his magboots—the magnetic soles were possibly strong enough to jam it but then he'd be stuck when they came outside. He'd lose the foot in the resulting frostbite if he took his boots off.

"Centurion, do you read?" Dirk said.

"Right here, Navy."

"Where are you?"

"Outside, air lock thirty-three. How is Scruggs?"

"She's in the med bay. Could be a concussion. Nothing weird on the scans."

"Outstanding. Dena, get there, okay?"

"Yes."

"Outstanding."

"I'm fine, too, if you want to know."

"Didn't ask, but you're talking to me, so"—the air lock door snapped shut—"listen, Navy, I'm outside, and they're cycling the air lock right now. I have thirty seconds till an armed crew comes out and shoots me."

"We're heading the wrong way. We need to kill velocity, yaw, and come back to pick you up."

"How long?"

"Long. Twenty minutes, more or less."

"That's too long. Are these standard air bottles? They look like standard to me."

"Think so, why?"

"Eight hours of air in a bottle. This one is half full right now. So, four hours left. How'd you do at pilot class, back in that academy?"

"I did. Okay... why... no. Don't do it."

"Time for a real-world test. Rescue and recovery. Let's see how good you are." The outer air lock door opened, and Ana crouched and pushed off hard into the black.

Chapter Ten

Ana twisted to bring his oxygen cylinder in front of him. His air levels were repeated on his comm, but his training was to always check the source item in case of multiple system failures.

"A, B, C," he chanted. How many training sergeants had yelled that at him, he wondered.

"Air—ten liters at three hundred bar."

He did the math, longer than three hours but not enough for four. He turned down the airflow manually.

Not recommended. It might make him fuzzy but would keep him alive longer.

"Bearing—where am I going?"

That was harder. He rolled slowly—even skilled space walkers rarely got their vector right. The station slid in front of him. He counted. He hit two hundred before it came back in sight. It looked smaller. He looked at the planet behind it and measured it with his outstretched hands, almost a full arm's width. Noted. After another rotation, he measured again. Less than an arm's width. Much less. Also noted.

He was heading away from the planet in a high orbit. It was unlikely he would reach escape velocity. He wasn't that strong in his legs, and his air would run out before he came back and brushed the planetary atmosphere. He'd suffocate, not burn up.

"Communications." He tapped his wrist comm.

All the tests flashed green. Working. Now that he was free of the station interference, everybody with a radio in line of sight could receive him, provided his signal was strong enough.

They might not understand what he was saying, but they'd figure out there was a signal.

He checked the channel indicator, still on the same channel they had chosen before. He heard no chatter.

"Not so bad," he said.

His instructors had told him to talk to calm himself. It used more air, but it helped to keep from panicking. He hadn't panicked in more than twenty years, even in worse situations. He didn't plan on starting. But rules were rules.

The heavens spun by overhead. The heavens, that was an expression. Was that what he was seeing? Just stars rolling past his faceplate. He'd always liked stars and would sometimes sit and watch

them at night when he was on guard. You can't see much in the dark. It's motion that you catch, so lying still, listening, and glancing up above the horizon was a legitimate way to stand guard. Or so he told himself. He'd have beaten any rookie private who told him that. 'Course he wasn't a rookie private anymore. Just a sick, grizzled old man.

"Not that old." He flexed his fingers. "Old enough. But definitely sick." He ran his hands over his suit, touching each item.

Skinsuit, boots, gloves, and helmet, of course. An emergency helmet on his back. Belt with a knife, holster for a revolver. He didn't have the revolver now—when did he lose that? He didn't remember that part. The shotgun lay next to the coughing store owner. He felt bad about that—the fellow had been friendly. But security would arrest him, search him, and question the poor guy for a few minutes before they realized he wasn't Ana.

He checked his comm. Twenty minutes was nearly gone. Should be hearing Navy on the radio. Should already have heard Navy on the radio—if he was coming to get him. He'd wait till they called. He didn't want to give a signal for somebody else to home in on unless rescue was close by. He should have had a spacer's beacon. But he wasn't a spacer. He was a ground guy. Come to think of it, he'd never seen Dirk or Gavin or the others wear them.

Dirk was probably too lazy, and Gavin was shady enough he would want no radio signature on him. The beacons were remotely tripped so that the pursuing ships could turn them on during search and rescue as they passed through an area. Conserved battery life but meant that you sent a heck of a radar return when fired up. Gavin wouldn't like that.

Dena and Scruggs didn't know about them. Dena for sure. Probably not Scruggs.

She was a smart girl, Scruggs. Just like Sally was. Just like Sally had been. Not his fault. He was away at the time. He couldn't have stopped it if he was there. He'd have tried, but what could you do? The guilt still gnawed at him. That's why he was out here.

Out here. He was out here, spinning, watching the stars. Wasn't somebody coming to get him? It was relaxing out here. Quiet. As he got older, he liked the quiet more and more. And the disease didn't help. The pain was coming back. He'd need more pills soon. The special pills, not the regular ones. Needed more of those pills *now*. He had only two left. Or was it three? Or one.

Something about time. About air. He should do his checklist again. A-B-C. Air. The wheel was in far. Had he done that? Of course, to conserve air until he was rescued. Air. Rescue.

Ana turned the wheel all the way to the right. The air cut off. He

had problems breathing. Not right. Was he dying? Turn the other way. For everything, there is a season, a time to be born, a time to die. Turn, turn. Turn left.

Air hissed into his helmet, his breathing relaxed, and his mind sharpened. He checked the gauge. Plenty of air.

"The valve was too tight."

He'd turned it down too far and almost killed himself.

He checked his comm. Forty-five minutes. Navy should have been back by then. Best to call. He clicked his radio, then clicked off.

"He's letting me die. Navy is letting me go."

Scruggs would never allow it, but she was out, last he'd heard. Who's left on the ship? Dirk, Gavin, and Lee. Dirk and Gavin weren't big fans. Lee had tried to strand him before.

"Should have killed her first."

What about Dena? Not sure where she stood. She'd been irritating but in a more comradely way. Competent girl, too bad about her upbringing. She'd do well.

He reached for his radio button again. "No. I'll wait. Either they come and get me, or this is it." He reached for the air and turned it down.

Not too far this time. But now he knew how to cut it low enough.

The stars spun by, and he loosened up and enjoyed the view.

***

"No radio, no thrusters, nothing," Dirk whispered to Gavin. He, Gavin, Dena, and Kay were in the lounge. "Lee says that there are three cutters out there now. They scrambled them after we left the station. Just bad luck they were in range."

"Why are you whispering, Pilot?" Kay asked. "They can't hear us, even if we shout. It's not like we're surrounded by air that will carry sounds back to them."

"Skipper likes to be dramatic," Gavin said. "One of the things we love about him. But who were you again? Why are you on board?"

"I'm Kay, the owner of your cargo."

"Pleased to meet you, cargo owner," Gavin said. "Will you be paying in precious metals or Imperial credits? You can pay anytime you want. Anytime. Right now, for example. Right now would be a good time."

"I'm not paying, not yet," Kay said.

"If you're not paying, then it's not your cargo. And if you don't have cargo, the second question, 'Why are you on board?' becomes the first."

"I want to keep an eye on my cargo," she said.

"As I just mentioned," Gavin said, "it's only your cargo if you pay.

That's the first thing they taught us in cargo school—no money, no delivery."

"Ms. Kay refused delivery at the station." Dirk beamed at her. "But she was instrumental in helping us escape the station authorities, for which I am truly grateful. I felt we should show our gratitude to her."

"Given that leering grin, it looks like you want me to show you some gratitude, in a more traditional format," Kay said. She turned to Dena. "Does that fake show-of-concern work on any women?"

Dena took a shot of the drink in her hand, grimaced, then drank the rest. "We let him think it does. It makes him feel good, makes him feel like he's in charge of the situation. It's good to keep him relaxed."

"You put up with this just so he can be relaxed?"

"Wait till you have experienced one of his landings."

"Is that whiskey?"

"Yes. I get stressed when I do EVAs."

Dirk laughed. "She nearly pukes her guts out."

"This from the guy who thought Rocky was a wolf."

"Rocky?" Kay said.

A black furry form trotted out of a room. Rocky sauntered up to Kay and squirmed by her legs, wagging his tail.

"He's adorable," Kay said, scratching his ears.

"Do you mean Navy pilot here or the dog?"

"The dog, of course. He's not trying to hump my leg. Unlike your pilot here."

"Give him time."

"Dogs are better than people."

"Some people, anyway," Gavin said. "If this isn't your cargo, and you aren't buying it, you have to leave."

"If I understand correctly," Kay said. "We're running silent, waiting for those cutters to leave so you can return to pick up that impressive centurion you left behind."

"Impressive?" Dena narrowed her eyes. "Have we met? You remind me of somebody."

Kay shook her head. "So, there's no real way for me to get out."

"There's a way," Gavin said. "If Skipper says so."

"All three of you couldn't put me out an air lock."

"Don't count me in this," Dena said. "But make sure I get a good seat. I want to see how it works out."

"Positive attitude there," Gavin said. "We might have to test this theory."

"I welcome your attempt." Kay set her feet. "Give it your best shot."

Dena clapped her hands. "Centurion! You sound like Ana when he wants to hurt somebody. I'll bet you could take the two of them."

"It's bad form to bet against your pilot," Dirk said.

“But it could be extremely lucrative,” Dena said. “Not sure who to bet with, though. Scruggs would, but she’s out. Hey, Lee, come back here.”

Lee climbed back from the cockpit. Rocky jumped to her waist and let her rub his ears.

“Fifty credits says Kay here kicks their butt if they try to throw her out of the ship.”

Lee bent to rub both of Rocky’s ears. “Why are they throwing her out of the ship?”

“She won’t pay for her cargo,” Dena said. “So, out she goes.”

“Her cargo? I thought it was Cheong’s cargo.”

“You see any ugly shirts around here, Navigator?” Dena said.

“No, I don’t. Where do you want your cargo delivered, Ms. Kay?”

“Shouldn’t you be getting your crew member back first?”

“We could just leave him behind, you know, for safety’s sake,” Gavin said. “We wouldn’t miss him.”

“I’d miss him,” Dena said.

“You would?”

Dena reached out for the jug of alcohol and uncorked it but stopped and put the cork back in. “I would miss him.”

“You surprise me,” Gavin said.

“I surprise me, too. But he helped lead those security people away, from the sound of it. We owe him for that. And he always goes down fighting, which is his job. He does his job, unlike some people here.” She nodded at Dirk.

“I’m doing my job right now—driving.”

“You’re supposed to be in charge and deciding how to rescue Ana.”

“If you all want to,” Dirk said.

“You need—never mind. Dirk, when are we going to pick him up?”

“There’s problems,” Dirk said. “Those cutters are in the way. And as soon as we fire up, they’ll detect us.”

Dena pulled the cork again. “Scruggs will kill you both, you realize, if you leave Ana behind.”

“I can handle Scruggs,” Dirk said.

“Not anymore,” Dena said. “You could before, maybe, but not now. If you leave him behind, she’s coming for you. Her and a metal hook, destined for your liver.”

“Who’s going to tell her?” Gavin said.

“I would,” Dena said. “For the fun, but no need. She’ll figure it out.”

“She’ll see reason. She’s smart.”

Dena poured her glass full. “She is. She’ll figure out exactly how much ammunition she needs to shoot you all with, then she’ll go around and methodically blast all three of you into bits. She’ll feel sad

about it." Dena downed the glass. "Afterwards, that is. I'll get her drunk. That will help."

"We can't leave Centurion behind," Lee said. "It's not right."

The three crew turned to Lee. "You left him behind before. Left all of us behind."

Kay pointed at Lee. "She abandoned you? Your navigator abandoned you?"

"It was a misunderstanding," Lee said.

"Yes, she misunderstood that Scruggs would shoot her if she didn't go back," Dena said. "Is four drinks too much, do you think? I'm not feeling buzzed, and I'm still kind of stressed."

"Is she telling the truth," Kay asked Lee. "You left them behind?"

"Kinda," Dirk said.

"Sorta," Gavin said.

"Yes," Lee said. She grabbed the cup from Dena's hands and drank it down. "It was a mistake."

"Hey, that was mine," Dena said.

"Yes it was," Lee said. "Pilot, I have an idea where Ana should be. We can pivot and correct after our next orbit, I think. We can beat the cutters to him. But it will be close. I'll need your help with the courses."

"They can still catch us."

"They don't have very good sensors."

Dirk grimaced. "Show me. Gavin, double check us."

The three left for the bridge.

Dena poured another drink and offered it to Kay.

Kay took a sip. "This is tasty. What is it?"

"Brandy from Amiens."

"That's outstanding. Somebody has good taste. Your navy pilot?"

"Your centurion."

"He's not my centurion."

"He could be if you wanted. I know that."

"How do you know that?"

"That's one of my areas of expertise. We've got people who know ships, weapons, engines, navigation, medicine, survival, and people. I'm one of the people persons. I specialize in men people."

Kay sipped more. "You're a strange bunch. At first glance, you seem like a random collection of losers."

"Oh, we are. But the different kinds of losers cancel each other out. We've been able to do some strange things. Even the losers get lucky some time."

"You're the weirdest smugglers I know," Kay said. "When Cheong recommended you, I didn't know what to think. Didn't want to do it."

"Let me guess, we're the third or fourth time you've tried this."

Kay finished her glass and set it down. “What makes you think that?”

“We don’t present well. Your first choice would have been something more official. A regular line. Probably failed on paperwork. Your second would have been a regular line with bribes. They botched the bribes. Your third was somebody who talked like they were a crook but ran as soon as the going got even the tiniest bit tough. You settled for us because we sounded desperate and disreputable.”

“Got it in one,” Kay said.

“We’re the best losers you could find,” Dena said. “And I mean that in the nicest possible way. We’ll take your stuff where you want it. But it will cost.”

“You say that now, but you don’t know where you’re going.”

“I heard some sort of war. Whose side are we on?”

“Mine,” Kay said. “Mine and my countrymen.”

“Do you have money?”

“Enough to buy weapons,” Kay said.

“Hooray for our side,” Dena said. “That’s what we want to hear. Who you fighting against?”

“The Confederation.”

“Hate those Imperial anuses,” Dena said.

“And the Nats.”

“Don’t like those stuck-up twits, either,” Dena said. “Both of them?”

“Both of them.”

“Well, we can work it out.”

“And the Empire.”

“And the Empire what?”

“The Empire as well. All three.”

“You’re fighting all three.”

“Yes. We’re fighting all three, the Empire, the Confederation, and the Nationalists. All three Empires and their Navies.”

“Huh,” Dena said. She picked up the bottle. “Time for another drink.”

Chapter Eleven

“You can avoid two of them at once,” Gavin said. “If you roll and point the drive away.”

The three crew members were running sims on the computer. The cockpit was dark except for the blinking course suggestions, which were swinging past the dark side of the planet, playing catch-up with the cargo stations.

“A vector change as we cleared into the sunlight would put us back on track to be in the general area Ana’s going to be in,” Lee said.

“The general area we think he’s in,” Gavin said. “And no matter how we spin, that one up there”—he pointed at a highest orbiting cutter—“will be able to see our course correction when the drive fires.”

“Their sensors aren’t that good,” Dirk said.

“You think they’re not that good,” Gavin said. “You hope.”

“Get us on track to catch him.”

“Even if we get on track, we don’t have an exact vector. We’ll have to maneuver in his neighborhood, and if he’s away from where we think he is, we won’t catch him, and we’ll be discovered. If we stay dark, we can wait till we’re at the top of the orbit we’re in now, then blast out. None of those cutters can catch us then.”

“Who were those guys chasing you?” Lee asked.

“Us?” Dirk said. “Station security. And some Confeds. The Confeds wanted to talk to Kay.”

“Not you pilot, the engineer here. He ran by while I was having my tea. A group of men in Nat coveralls were after him.”

“You were being chased by a National crew?” Dirk asked.

“Just some people I knew from before,” Gavin said.

“Before? Before what?”

“Just before. Not your concern.”

“They had shock sticks and weapons,” Lee said.

“You know some dangerous people, Engineer,” Dirk said.

“And right behind that Nat crew,” Lee said, “Was another group, a group of Confed customs people. They were following closely and talking on their comms. I heard them say ‘Crewjacki.’”

“You know that’s not my real name,” Gavin said.

“No, but it’s a name,” Dirk said, “and I’m curious how they know it.”

“Just, just—”

“Just some guys you used to know. Right, Navigator.” Dirk took a deep breath. “Lee. Set this up. Ana led those people away from us. Dena’s right. We need to count on each other. If we want somebody to go, we ask them. Not leave them to die in space. Set a course to pick him up. Soon as we fire the engines, we’ll get on the radio and talk to him. He can guide us in.”

“I don’t like this, Skipper,” Gavin said.

“I don’t like all these people that you used to know, but we’re not tossing you out the air lock because of it. Understand, Engineer?”

“Got it, Pilot,” Lee said.

“Skipper,” Gavin said.

“Right, now we go back to talk to our future employer.”

Dirk pulled himself back to the lounge where Kay was and explained the situation.

“We need to pick up our crewman,” Dirk said. “And then we need to go somewhere and get paid. That’s where you come in.”

“I don’t have money with me,” Kay said.

“Then, best give us a destination where you can find some,” Dirk said. “Suggestions? We need to set up a jump now.”

“New Oregon,” Kay said. “We’re going to New Oregon.”

“Right,” Dirk said. “Let me look that up.” He tapped through his comm. “I don’t have that name.”

“You would know it as Procyon-VI,” Kay said.

“Got it,” Dirk said. “Huh. On the border between the Confederation and Union of Nations. Claimed by the Confederation. Claims ‘held in abeyance,’ bunch of stuff here about a tradeoff, Imperial intervention, and suchlike.”

“The Confeds and the Nats made a deal. They split up their border space between them. Some planets went one way, some another. Your Empire—”

“It’s not my Empire,” Dirk said.

“Your Empire”—Kay crossed her arms—“supports the treaty, which means they left us to the Nats.”

“We can talk about that later. Is that where we’ll get paid?”

“That’s where I want the weapons to go.”

“Then, that’s where we’re going,” Dirk said. “After we pick up Ana. If we can.”

***

Ana pushed his hands together. Push, release, push, release. Isometric exercises weren’t fun but necessary. He didn’t want to cramp. When the Heart’s Desire would find him, he would board under his own power. And hit a few people for taking so long, also under his own power.

He pulled his air tank in front to check the gauge. It matched his comm display—less than an hour left. They better show up fast.

"This is Station Cutter S-1333 on Channel 4-5-6. Do you need assistance, spacer?"

Ana flipped the bottle back. How had they found him? He'd gone dark.

"The same way Dirk will," Ana said.

They had guessed his trajectory from the station, set up a cone to search, and used radar. But he was small. If they could see him on radar, they couldn't be far away.

The voice repeated itself twice, then shut up. Ana waited, but they didn't come back. He thought about that, then flipped his radio ten channels ahead and waited.

The voice came up again.

"This is Station Cutter S-1333 on Channel 4-6-6. Do you need assistance, spacer?"

Ana counted the three attempts, then worked to the next channel, hearing the voice again. They were working through the channels one by one. Either somebody didn't have multiple simultaneous channel capability or they didn't know how to use their computer to do a simultaneous broadcast. Or both.

He set himself in a slow roll, then added another axis. He was now tumbling through two dimensions, enough to give him a view in all directions. The primary slid by in the distance, then a moon. The station had long disappeared from view, and the planet was ten percent of its size.

There, a glint. Another. Must be the cutter. He tried to guess its intercept, but he wasn't a spacer. He was comfortable in the black and could make estimates of close things, but the cutter was too far away, with no other reference point.

The light from the cutter brightened, then blasted to a burning pinpoint. They had pivoted and were firing retro. What he was seeing was the main engines as they swapped vectors. They must think they could catch him in this orbit if they fired up the big guns. Otherwise, they would have sailed by and done a minor correction lower or higher to save fuel.

Good for him. They'd pick him up soon. He pushed his boots together and pushed into the stretch. Now the question was, did he want to be rescued?

***

"Got him," Dena said. "I can put his position on your screen, but I don't know how to do that fancy course plot thing."

She sat in the control room, in the back row. Kay sat at the console

next to her. Dirk and Lee filled the pilot and copilot seats. Gavin had retreated to engineering, and Scruggs was in the med bay.

"You're the sensor operator, and you can't do course plots?" Kay said.

"I'm not the sensor operator."

"But you're scanning."

"The only sensor operator is asleep in the med pod. Except for the old man, of course. He's pretty good. You're in his chair."

"That's why this screen came up on weapons."

"That's right."

"There's something wrong with it," Kay said. "They're not registering. All the options say 'not installed.'"

"That's correct," Dirk said. "We have no weapons, not even defensive ones."

"Nothing?"

"You could get up on the hull and throw rocks," Dirk said.

"If you could get out on the hull," Lee said.

"And if we had rocks," Dena said. She belched.

"You're drunk," Kay said.

"Not completely, but I'm pretty happy about life right now."

"Your pilot allows drunken crew members to be on duty?"

"We encourage it, actually," Dena said. "Makes some things easier."

Lee put a course plot on all the screens. "Dena, here's that position you gave me and our course. But we need an update to calculate a basic plot for the centurion. Even a straight line. But how did you find him? I don't think he'll register on our radar at this distance."

"He didn't. He won't. I got a reflection off him."

"A reflection? From our radar."

"No, not from our radar. From that other ship out there, the whatchamacallit, the cutter? They've been pinging him steadily. I used that reflection thing Scruggs showed me, reading him off their radar."

"The other cutter? What other cutter?" Dirk said. "Can you put that up here, too?"

"Not sure, exactly."

"You don't know how?"

"Partially. Also, I'm kind of drunk, as we discussed."

"I cannot believe that you let people work drunk," Kay said.

"Wait till his next sober landing. You'll change your tune. But I think we can fix this."

"You can get it on the screen?" Dirk asked. The board bonged. "Have to roll and do one of Lee's corrections. Stand by." Dirk tapped a few screens and eased them left. They all swayed as the thrusters kicked in for a moment, then the main drive lit up. "Can you get him on the screen?"

Dena tapped her screen. “I can’t. Scruggs can.”

“She’s sleeping in the med bay,” Lee said, eyes on her screen.

“I think she’s awake, and I think she’s better. But I’ll bet she’s upset.”

“How can you know that?” Lee asked. “Pilot, next vector is on your screen.”

“Understood,” Dirk said, twisting the controls. “Dena, how can you possibly know she’ll be upset?”

“Well, she probably has a big headache from the fight.”

“Yes, yes,” Dirk said, focused on his screen.

“And she’s probably not happy that she can’t find Centurion right now. She looks up to him, you know.”

“We know that,” Lee said. “Pilot, in five, four , three...” The ship twisted up, and Dirk tapped another button. The main drive fired for less than a second. “On course. We’ll explain about leaving Centurion behind later.”

“And the main reason, the real reason, I know...”

“Is what?” Dirk said. “Lee, did that other cutter react? Watch them. Track their beacon. Dena, how do you know?”

“She’s standing behind you with her shotgun, pointed at your head.”

The three froze, then turned around. A pale Scruggs had entwined herself into the crash nets. Her arms and legs were braced in and around the straps. Dried blood caked her face, and a shiny, loaded shotgun pointed forward at Dirk’s face.

“How you doing, Baby Marine? You don’t look so good.” Dena leaned over and vomited on the floor. “’Course, neither do I.”

Chapter Twelve

The main drive of the approaching cutter stopped flaring. The light died, and shadows rolled along the oncoming ship.

"Now thrusters," Ana said.

The cutter was venting air or nitrogen to pivot. It finished the main engine braking and made tinier corrections. Ana calculated, waited till his roll, hid his hands from their view, then reached down and tapped his radio. After ten seconds, he heard the voice on the radio, counting through channels. *That radio operator was persistent.*

Next roll, he tapped back to Scruggs's channel, leaving his hand there so he could unobtrusively change channels even in view of the cutter. He still hadn't decided whether he wanted to be rescued. His air continued to drop. Couldn't have much longer to go. He didn't even try to do that calculation. He either had enough air or not. Nothing to it.

The channel light lit up on his arm.

"Centurion, this is Heavyweight Items. Do you copy?" Dirk said.

"Changed your mind, Navy?" Ana said.

"What's your status? And changed about what?"

"About leaving me to die? No comms, and you've been a long time getting here."

"We had to go dark and circle the planet. There were some cutters..."

"I see one of them here right now. Should be up on me in five minutes. Are you planning on beating them to me?"

"No," Dirk said.

Ana waited, but there was no more.

"Oh, sorry, Navy, I misunderstood. I thought this was a 'we're coming to rescue you call,' but it's actually a 'good luck, hope you don't suffer too much when you gasp to death on your last breath' call. Didn't think you had the balls."

"No, we're coming to get you. We just... the geometry isn't right. We can't beat that cutter. But we can rendezvous with you in nineteen point two minutes, according to Lee."

"Precise with her navigation, that Jovian. I'll give her that. She's good with numbers. 'Nineteen point two minutes,' she says. I figure I'll be grabbed and in custody in perhaps six point three minutes, so that's a wave off. Good luck, god speed, and free trades. That cutter will be on me before you can get a visual. Hopefully, you can break for the

jump limit and get away before those other cutters get to you."

"We're coming to get you."

"I said no."

"I don't have an option, Centurion. I've been directed."

"Who directed you?"

"Scruggs."

"And you take her directions?"

"When she points a shotgun at me, yes."

"She's pointing a shotgun at you? Has she hijacked the ship again?"

"Yes. Thanks for teaching her that."

"Wasn't me. Natural talent on that girl's part. Put her on the radio."

There was a long pause, then Scruggs's scratchy voice came on.

"Centurion? Are you okay?"

"Private, what are you doing?"

"Rescuing you."

"I don't want to be rescued. Go away."

"Not up to you, Centurion. People get lost off the ship, we pick them up. Don't leave them behind. That's what you said. No person left behind."

"This person doesn't want to be rescued."

"You never asked me what I wanted when you made me do things. You said it was good training or mission readiness or necessary habits or standard procedure. Standard procedure is to rescue people who get separated from the ship. We're rescuing you. Your feelings don't matter into it."

"At gunpoint?"

"Pilot's feelings don't come into it, either. He does tend to be lazy. I wanted him to be quicker about the rescue. I thought the shotgun might help."

"You hijacked a ship because the crew was lazy?"

"You said it's all about giving people the proper motivations, Centurion. Everyone is very motivated to rescue you now."

"The prospect of sudden death does tend to focus the mind."

"That's a good enough reason, Centurion. They have to maneuver soon. I'll have to click off."

"He'll use that time to try to knock you off your feet and take back the ship."

"I'm bunched up into the crash nets behind the control room. Even a full roll won't knock me out. I had to hit the intercom with my chin. I've got my hands and feet wedged around the shotgun."

"He'll just rock the ship till you let go."

"He can try, but my finger's on the trigger. That banging might make me set off the shotgun."

"You're prepared to clean up the mess?"

“Dena already puked on the floor. I’ll make her do it.”

“Is the engineer there?”

“No, Centurion, he won’t be sneaking up behind me from engineering and hitting me with a wrench. I jammed the hatch. And he doesn’t have the right wrench.”

“Good job on the hatch, but he always has that favorite wrench of his on his tool belt.”

“What do you think I jammed the hatch with?”

“You surprise me sometimes, Private. Very well, operation geriatric rescue is commencing. Get the ship over here, and we’ll rendezvous.”

“What about the cutter, Centurion?”

“I’ll take care of that.”

***

“We were going to rescue him,” Dirk said.

“Yes, Pilot,” Scruggs said.

“Things just got confused.”

“Yes, Pilot.”

“Lee made us go dark, no radio contact to hide from those other cutters.”

“That was smart,” Scruggs said. “She’s a good navigator.”

“Now we’re on our way. She even managed to hide most of our maneuvers till that final one.”

“She really is very clever. She showed me things on the navigation board. I wish I could navigate like you could.”

“So, it’s not really our fault.”

“Completely not,” Scruggs agreed. “Just one of those things.”

Dirk cocked his head sideways. “Are you listening to anything I’m saying?”

“Everything, Pilot. I keep agreeing with you.”

“I know. That makes no sense. If you agree with what I did, why are you pointing that gun at me?”

“It’s not what you’ve already done, Pilot, it’s what you’re going to do. The shotgun is to make sure that we rescue the centurion. This makes sure you won’t change your mind. The past is gone. All that matters is the future.”

“That’s very philosophical, Private,” Kay said.

“Thank you, ma’am. Centurion taught that to me.”

“He seems pretty smart, this Centurion.”

“Oh, he is, ma’am. But I didn’t get your name and why you’re here.”

“I’m the owner of your cargo.”

“Not until she pays,” Dirk said. “She talks a lot, but I haven’t seen any money. She wants us to go to a war.”

“That sounds like fun.”

Kay grinned. “It’s not, but that aside, I’m also the one who carried you back to the ship after you were shot.”

“Thank you very much, ma’am. Why did you do that?”

“What?”

“Carry me? Why.”

“Not very grateful, are you?”

“I am very, very grateful. I even said thank you. But you must have had a reason. Not because you liked me, probably something to do with the cargo or the crew.”

“You’re very strange. This whole crew is very strange.”

“Thank you, ma’am.”

“Well, one thing for sure, this isn’t my fight, so…” Kay reached down to unlatch her belt.

“Don’t,” Dirk said.

“Please stay seated, ma’am,” Scruggs said.

“Why? I’m not part of this rolling menagerie, so—”

BANG.

The frangibles smashed into the roof of the cabin, and dust filled the space.

Kay collapsed, coughing into her seat. “No need for that, young lady.”

“Sorry, ma’am. I’m kind of busy, and I didn’t have time to talk, and Centurion always said that if you’re confused as to what to do, it’s best to shoot first.”

“And ask questions later?”

“He didn’t say anything about questions, no. What do questions have to do with it?”

“Never mind.” Kay buckled into her seat. “I can watch from here.”

“Thank you, ma’am.”

“So, your plan is to kill the pilot if he doesn’t recover your centurion friend?”

“I don’t think I could do that, I’m afraid,” Scruggs said.

Dirk brushed more dust off his hair and wiped his mustache. “Thank the Emperor’s mother. You’re finally starting to see sense. I knew you didn’t want to kill us.” He reached for his harness buckle.

“I didn’t say that,” Scruggs said. “I said I didn’t think I *could*. These are frangibles. Even if I stuck the shotgun to your forehead and fired, I probably wouldn’t kill you, just cripple you, make you into a drooling vegetable.” She waggled the gun. “Nor you, Navigator. But I could certainly disable both of you. Break arms, legs, that sort of thing. Then I could leave you here for a moment, go and get a knife or something. Something sharp.”

“My ax is in the main locker,” Dena slurred from the floor. “That

brandy is fierce, sneaks up on you."

"I've never killed a man with an ax," Scruggs said. "How do you do it?"

"Need more room," Dena said. "Gotta get a good overhead swing to smash in the brains."

"And that, of course, is something you know how to do," Dirk said.

"Want to see my technique, Pilot?" Dena said, sitting up and wiping her mouth. "I can give a demo if you want."

"Contact," Lee said. "I've got that other cutter in the telescope. They're maneuvering. And I can see a speck ahead of them."

"I have to slow us," Dirk said. "Prepare for a spin, then main engines. Is that all right, Scruggs?"

"Of course, Pilot, I wouldn't dream of telling you how to do your job."

"But you would stake me to the ground and cut my head off with an ax?"

"She doesn't need to stake you to the ground," Kay said. "With a weapon like an ax, most efficient way is a thrust—use it like a staff and smash the metal end into your chest. That will break ribs, crush the heart. You'll be dead in a minute. No need for overhead swings or extra room."

Dirk turned and glared at her.

"What?" Kay said. "I felt left out of the conversation."

***

The planetary cutter hove to between Ana and the primary. The sun disappeared behind its bulk as he floated. Dirk's voice came over the radio.

"Centurion, we have you in sight. No, strike that. We have that cutter in sight, and they've slowed relative to us, so I'm assuming that they're recovering you?"

"I'm off their starboard side. They'll pick me up soon. I hope somebody does. I don't have much air left." Ana checked his arm display. He was too tired to spin his bottle up front. "Six point five minutes, according to this. What's your ETA?"

"We'll be there in time," Dirk said.

"Which means I'll be out of air by the time you get here. Stupid Navy people, never on time. Right, here's the plan. Stay on your course. Get set up for zero-zero. Meet with me at these coordinates. I'll capture the crew from the cutter, steal some air, attack their ship, force it to break off and clear the area, then I can board in comfort. That work for you?"

"Capture the crew? Attack their ship? Do you have some weapons that we don't know about?" Dirk asked.

“I have an empty air bottle, an empty holster, and a small bag of fake beef jerky.”

“How will you—”

“Improvise, adapt, overcome. That and five minutes is all I need. You going to get here on time or not, Navy?”

“Ten minutes, Centurion.”

“The slogan of the Imperial navy—five minutes after the fight is over. See you then. I’m switching channels to deal with this.” Ana flipped his radio channel over and clicked through the higher ones till he heard the voice.

“. . . going to attempt rescue operations. Reply if you understand.”

“Can you hear me now Station Cutter S-1333?” Ana said.

“. . . will be—what? Station calling Station Cutter S-1333, identify.”

“I’m the floating near-corpse off your starboard side. And I’ve been calling you for hours, following you up and down those stupid channels. What’s wrong with your radio?”

“Nothing, I don’t think. We thought your radio wasn’t working.”

“Son, I’ve heard you counting up and down like a class of drunken preschoolers. I heard you fine. I can transmit fine. I’ve talked to some other ships. I even called in another ship to come and rescue me. That freighter on your six, I called them in when you wouldn’t answer.”

“We never heard your transmissions. You must not be transmitting properly.”

“So, it’s my fault, is it?” Ana said. “I was able to call in a freighter from planetary orbit all the way out here to get me, but little old you didn’t hear me? Answer me this, son. In this entire time, while you were searching for me, did you receive anything on those channels you were calling on? Anything from more than twenty meters away like I am? Did you ever think to check that? Could it be that you were the problem?”

“Noooo.”

“Fine. Come and get me. And I’ll bet you didn’t hear that I’m nearly out of air, either, so they better have a couple extra bottles with them.”

“We’ll bring you into the ship. It will only take a few seconds—”

“I’ve got a broken leg. Compound fracture. If you haul me in, I’ll probably faint, go into cardiac arrest, poke a bone through my suit, bleed out in space, and more importantly, be extremely irritated. You don’t want me irritated. Bring out extra oxygen, a puffer, and let me get into the lock under my own power. Got it?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good. And bring one of those spacer beacons, the push ones. You guys have the push ones, the emergency beacons?”

“Our crew wears them, yes. But—”

“Bring one for me. Mine’s some fancy automatic one, didn’t work at all. I want a beacon, a simple one, in case I get lost again.”

“Yes, sir. Were you in the army, sir?”

“What do you think, son? How long till your crew gets here?”

“Exiting the air lock now.”

“Outstanding,” Ana said.

It was seventy seconds by Ana’s comm until the cutter’s air lock opened. The two cutter crew members pushed off from their air lock and floated to Ana. One had two air bottles. The other carried a fist-sized piece of electronics painted bright red. Both made three pumps with their arms. Ana guessed that meant working channel three and dialed his comm over.

“Station Cutter S-1333?”

“Yes, sir. You’re wounded?” They extended puffers and fired off to drift to a halt.

“And out of air. Don’t go near my feet or legs yet, or you’ll hear screaming like you don’t believe.”

“You’ll be fine, sir. We’ll take care of you.”

“I’ll be the judge of that. Is that the beacon?”

The spacer in front of Ana held it up. “It is, sir, just like the one I’m wearing.”

“Hand it to me, carefully. I’m nervous about this whole thing. I want to make sure you can find me later if something goes wrong.”

“Yes, sir, please remain calm.” The spacer extended the beacon. Ana turned it over and looked at it through his helmet. “How’s it work?”

The spacer pointed to his chest. “Sharp slap on this switch, sir. You need to hit it hard for a second, and it deploys. Also deploys if you hit something hard.”

“Like if you kicked it.”

“That would do it.”

Ana’s helmet light flashed. “I’m on my last dregs of air. Can one of you get behind and wire me up? Give me the spare. I can hold it. Be careful you don’t bump.”

The second spacer handed Ana an air bottle. Ana clutched the beacon with his right hand and accepted the second spare air bottle with his left.

“If you could turn over, sir,” the man said.

“That hurts a lot. Just go behind me. Now, I’m nearly out.”

“Please stay calm, sir,” the second spacer said and puffed back behind Ana.

He muttered something that sounded like ‘wimp,’ but Ana couldn’t make it out. Hands closed valves and disconnected hoses on his back. The hissing air stopped.

Ana counted. He made it to seven before he felt the twist of a nozzle, and his air started flowing again. He held up his arm and waited as the sensor calibrated, then nodded as it changed to read seven hours, forty minutes.

"Good job," Ana said. "I can breathe now."

"Yes, sir. If you would relax, we'll use our puffers and push you back."

"I don't feel so good," Ana said, rolling onto his back and drawing his knees up. He and his air buddy rolled perpendicular to the beacon spacer.

"Please stay still, sir."

"My legs hurt. I think I'm going to be sick."

"Stay still, please. That's normal, sir. You've been stressed. Some people react badly to a difficult time," the spacer in front of him said.

"React badly how? Like this?"

Ana kicked him in the chest. Right on the beeper. The front light flashed green as he propelled away.

"Hey," grunted the man behind him as Ana slammed into him. "Your legs."

Ana slapped his beacon onto his chest and felt it stick. He reached back with his free hand and pulled the second spaceman over his head. He punched the spare air bottle into his chest and grabbed his puffer as he flipped over.

The man flailed his arms. "In the Emperor's name, what's this about?"

"Nothing personal," Ana said.

The spacer's beacon didn't light, so Ana hit him in the chest again. The beacon flashed green, and Ana slapped his spare air bottle onto his belt. Magnets gripped it tight. He grasped the spaceman's right hand with his left, extended the puffer as far as he could, and fired it to max. The two men pinwheeled as the puffer acted on their center of mass. Ana waited till their spin increased, then let go, still firing his puffer. His former hand-holding partner spun out into the void, beacon flashing.

Ana tumbled himself. He ignored the stars passing in front of his visor. He scrabbled for somewhere to put the puffer, but his belt wouldn't catch it. After feeling all over, he wound the lanyard part way around his wrist and used both hands to clip the free end to his belt harness. He jerked when he heard a click in his ears. He was in space—sounds were bad. Then he figured the closing snap on his belt had traveled up his suit. His radio call light was lit, and the ship radio operator was yelling in his ear, but he ignored both.

Using both hands, he pried the beacon off his chest. Once in his hand, he slapped his beacon. It didn't flash green. Instead, a flashing

yellow twenty appeared, followed by an arrow, then another yellow number—forty-five, then another arrow. The sequence repeated every ten seconds.

"It's broken," Ana said. "These Imperial turds gave me a broken beacon."

Both numbers were increasing. The first one reached thirty-five. The second passed a hundred, then switched to red. Ana watched them increase and followed the arrows. They changed direction but not as rapidly as the numbers climbed. *It's in find mode. It's pointing the location to the other beacons.*

Ana punched the front button. The lights disappeared. He waited five seconds, but it stayed dark. He pressed the button, and it clicked over to the numbers again. He slammed it against his chest hard, and this time, the green flashes fired.

"Gotcha." He cocked his arm, then threw the beacon as hard as he could in a random direction. He counted to ten, then punched his radio button.

"But where is Prim, and what do you mean he hit you? Who—" the radio operator was saying.

"Help, help, they're trying to kill me. They turned off my air. One had a gun. He shot the other. They're trying to leave me behind. I've activated my beacon. Come and get me, please, please. They cut off my air."

Ana cut his transmission and listened to the frantic calls. The radio operator was on with one of the spacemen. He had telemetry from both of his crew. They were both still alive, but one of them wasn't answering the radio. Ana waited till he heard the radio operator report three beacons active. A drive flashed in the distance. That ship was maneuvering. Good.

Ana took a few deep breaths to calm himself. He was still tumbling, but it didn't bother him.

He switched to Scruggs's channel. "Navy, you here yet?"

"Centurion," Dirk said, "we see three beacons."

"I'm none of those. That's the cutters and crew."

"The cutter is moving off, but they're demanding we assist in search and rescue."

"So, assist. Search for me, and when you find me, rescue me."

"Lee is using the radar. What did you do?"

"Adapt, improvise, overcome," Ana said. "Will this search take a long time? I could use some lunch."

Chapter Thirteen

“I’d rather not repeat that,” Ana said, pulling his helmet off. Rocky the Whippet jumped up and tried to lick his face. “At least somebody here missed me. Good to see you, too, furball.”

“I missed you, Centurion,” Scruggs said. “That’s why I insisted we pick you up.”

“I didn’t miss you,” Gavin said, coming up to the air lock.

“Wanted me dead, did you?” Ana said.

“I don’t want it anymore,” Gavin said. “I’m over such things.”

“You’ve accepted him as a person of value for the crew?” Dirk asked, stepping back from the control room.

“Nope. The old man here is pretty crazy. He’ll get himself shot or stabbed or eaten by carnivorous tabbos all by himself. He won’t need my help.”

“I have to admit, that’s a pretty realistic attitude,” Ana said.

“What I do want is not to be locked in engineering again,” Gavin said. “Was that necessary there, Scruggs? That was my favorite wrench.”

“That’s why I picked it,” Scruggs said. “You always said it’s your favorite, and since you’re such a great engineer, that must mean it was the best and the strongest and most versatile tool you have. You’re picking it is what made me decide.”

Gavin lowered his eyebrows. “That sounds like flattery, and yet, somehow, I feel like I’ll be locked in engineering again, sometime.”

“You’re complaining about being locked up? We had a shotgun pointed at us,” Dirk said.

“Don’t leave anybody behind,” Scruggs said.

“We weren’t going to leave anybody behind,” Dirk said.

“There never was a decision on that,” Lee said.

“I saved you from having to make a potentially embarrassing choice,” Scruggs said. “You can thank me later.”

“You could have killed us by accident,” Dirk said. “One slip of the hand, and I’d be dead.”

“Just like your landings,” Scruggs said. “You nearly kill all of us every time. You don’t hear us complaining.”

“That girl makes a lot of sense, sometimes,” Gavin said.

“I don’t want to have to fly with a shotgun at my head again,” Dirk said.

“Don’t leave people behind,” Scruggs said.

“You could try to take the shotgun from her,” Ana suggested, racking his suit.

Scruggs faced Dirk, cradling the shotgun. She didn’t point it but raised her eyebrows.

“This will be interesting,” Ana said. “Fifty credits on Scruggs.”

“I won’t take that bet,” Gavin said. “I’m with her, too. Lee, you stand up for the skipper a lot. Hundred credits to you.”

Lee looked from Dirk to Scruggs. “She’s fast. And determined. Plus, she’s saved my life before on that river, and she helped defend me when I had my... unfortunate incident.”

Dirk stepped back and held his hands wide. “This is mutiny.”

“You haven’t given any actual orders, Skipper,” Gavin said. “Mutiny is disobeying orders.”

“No sense giving orders that you won’t obey,” Dirk said.

“Obey what?” Dena said, slouching up to the air lock. “My head is killing me. What’s all the noise? Oh, you’re back, old man. Did we rescue you?”

“Yes, no thanks to you.”

“I scanned for you, and I found the cutters that we got away from,” Dena said. “So, bite me. Um, I was a little tense after my EVA, so I drank half of your brandy. That stuff catches up on you.”

“I wondered what that smell was. You puked it up?”

“Yes, but Rocky ate it all up. He thought it was tasty.”

They all looked at Rocky, who licked his lips and wagged his tail.

“Dogs are like that,” Ana said. “That brandy was expensive.”

“Sorry.”

“I’ll spank you later, when I have time.”

“Promises, old man, promises.” Dena sat down. “Hiya, Kay. Enjoying the show?”

Everyone turned. Kay had been so quiet they had forgotten she was there.

“I’m wondering if I should leave,” Kay said.

“Air lock’s there. Help yourself,” Ana said.

“We’re nearly at the jump limit.”

“Didn’t say it was easy. Pilot. Lee.”

“What?” Dirk said.

“Thank you for coming back to get me. Scruggs.”

“Yes, Centurion?”

“Thank you for threatening to kill everyone on my behalf. Outstanding work.”

“Thank you, Centurion.”

Dirk dropped his hands. “And Ana, you did well leading those people away from us. Thank you. And Dena, and Scruggs, good shots in the restaurant there. You both fight well.”

“Ahhh, this is so nice,” Ana said. “Old home day here. Is this where we all cry and hug?”

“If that happens, I’ll puke again,” Dena said.

“I’ll call Rocky,” Ana said. “Miss Kay, we have your cargo. Give us some money, and you can have it back.”

“Technically, it’s Cheong’s cargo. We’re supposed to give it to him,” Gavin said.

“Right,” Ana said. “What happened to him, anyway?”

“He ran off in the confusion,” Dirk said. “He might be dead.”

“I don’t think the universe is that kind,” Ana said.

“None of you care what happened to Cheong?” Kay asked.

Everybody shook their head.

“He said that you were his favorite crew.”

Everyone laughed.

“Where are we going, Navy?” Ana asked.

“Ms. Kay wants us to deliver her goods to a war. We haven’t fleshed out the details, exactly.”

“After all this, I’m not sure that you’re a crew I’d trust,” Kay said.

“Why not?” Gavin asked.

“Your navigator stole the ship.”

“Technically, she tried to steal the ship but was unsuccessful,” Gavin said.

“Only because Scruggs seized control with a shotgun.”

“She does that,” Gavin said. “She wasn’t good at it before, but she’s been practicing.”

“And it seems like you’ll come to blows at any time.”

“That’s already happened,” Dirk said. “Centurion and the engineer had a duel way back. They beat each other senseless with sticks.”

“I was not senseless,” Ana said. “Just serious injuries. And I broke the engineer’s arm.”

“He’s pretty good with a staff,” Gavin said. “Neither of us walked away. We had to be helped.”

“The two of you had a fight, and you’re still on the ship,” Kay said. “Why didn’t the others throw you off?”

“Well, the others also have a few issues. For example, Scruggs shot part of Ana’s ear off,” Dirk said.

“An excellent shot, if I say so myself,” Ana said. “She is getting quite handy with that gun.”

“What’s your story, Dena?” Kay asked.

“Nothing special. I started a small war and lost. So, I slept my way onboard. I don’t regret the war. Could have chosen the sleeping part better.”

“Oh, that’s all? Just a small war.”

“She tried to kill Scruggs with a barbell that one time.”

“True,” Dena said. “But we got over it.”

“And you’re a drunk,” Kay said.

“That’s not true,” Scruggs said. “Dena isn’t a drunk. She just doesn’t like the black. She’s fine otherwise. Pilot is the drunk.”

“Thanks for sharing, Scruggs,” Dirk said.

“She’ll figure it out first drop you do, Pilot,” Scruggs said. “Oh, and the ship isn’t ours. Pilot stole it.”

“I thought we agreed that we all had a hand in stealing it,” Dirk said.

“But initially, you did it yourself. You lied to us all. Except maybe the navigator, but she’d already stolen a container-load of medical supplies.”

“I paid for those,” Lee said.

“With a fake credit line,” Ana said. “I admit, very creative and well done.”

“Let me see if I understand this,” Kay said. “I’m stuck on a ship of viciously violent criminals, thieves, hijackers, rebels, drunks, and misfits.”

“Got it in one,” Dena said. “The same group who successfully stole your cargo from wherever the Confederation had impounded it, drove it to the local spaceport, smuggled it aboard, flew into a Confederation station, met up with you, helped you escape a trap set for you, avoided the security forces, flew with the goods, avoided pursuing ships, rescued our stranded crewmembers, and are now headed out to the jump limit enroute to wherever you want these to go. So”—Dena took a big gulp of basic—“it’s true. This basic does help with the hangover. So, employer, where do you want these weapons delivered, and how much will you pay?”

Chapter Fourteen

Kay's initial offer of payment caught the crew's attention.

"We do like to return things to their rightful owners," Dirk said.

"And we don't know anybody else who will buy a shipload of weapons," Dena said.

"Shut up, Dena," Gavin said. "Explain this to us, Ms. Kay."

"So, it's Miss Kay now?" Lee said. "Making new friends."

Gavin gave her a look. "She's too old for me, Lee."

"Because young ladies are stupid enough to buy your cheap lines, that's true," Kay said. She turned to Scruggs and Dena. "Young men are so tiresome. They give you the same old hackneyed pickup lines, but they have no skills, no finesse. The only way they're even slightly tolerable is if you've been alone for a very, very long time, and they're the only thing on offer. And then only if they take instructions and don't talk."

"I don't think—" Gavin said.

"Shsssh," Kay said, making a lip closing motion. "That's what I meant. Don't follow directions and blather all the time. See what I mean, ladies?"

"I like her," Dena says. "I hope she stays."

"About the money?" Dirk said.

The crew had gathered in the lounge. Dena had cleaned up, and Ana had changed outfits. Scruggs's shotgun had disappeared. The blue light of a jump field blazed from the monitor screens. The microwave made a grinding noise as it cooked a set of trays for them.

"We'd like to hear more about this payment."

The microwave ground again as Ana pulled his tray out.

"Twenty-five thousand credits," Kay said. "What Cheong said he was going to pay you. And much more than he would have actually have paid you. That's the money we're talking about."

"That's a lot of money," Lee said.

"Too much money," Ana said. He pulled the top off his red, green, and blue tray and spooned the blue into his mouth. "Food's always cold now. When are you going to fix that, Engineer?"

"It's on the list, old man," Gavin said.

"Outstanding," Ana said. "Now, tell us about the war."

"How much do you know about New Oregon and its history?" Kay asked.

"Like Old Oregon, only newer?" Gavin asked.

“Young men think they’re funny,” Kay said, “when they’re annoying. Take my advice ladies, find an older boyfriend who isn’t such an idiot. He’ll have better manners, treat you better, and he might even be competent at his job.”

“I’m competent at my job,” Gavin said. “I’m a good engineer.”

“It’s true, Ms. Kay,” Scruggs said. “The engineer is good at his job. He keeps us running.”

“And you’re qualified to tell?” Kay asked. “Known a lot of engineers, have you? Know ways to tell if they’re competent? How can you tell if he’s good or not? He could be fake, making things up while hiding the fact that he doesn’t know a fusion engine from a trash compactor?”

“Well, he, I mean”—Scruggs blinked—“we haven’t exploded.”

“Yet,” Dena said.

“What do you know? You’re from that dead-end planet,” Gavin said.

“Where are you from again?” Dena asked. “Oh, I forgot—I won’t-tell-you-where land?”

“I’m a good engineer,” Gavin said.

“Prove it,” Kay said. “Stop that microwave from rattling.”

“Not because you said so,” Gavin said, “but because it’s on my list, and unlike some, I can do two things at once.” He looked sideways at Dirk. “More than two things at once.”

“Why are you looking at me?” Dirk said. “Are you saying—”

“He’s not saying anything to you, Navy. Relax,” Ana said, spooning the last of his tray into his mouth. “He’s not saying you can’t do two things at once.”

“Okay,” Dirk said.

“Watching your landings, you can’t even do one thing at once. We’d all be happy if you could get that worked out.”

“My landings are—”

“Horrifying,” Lee said.

“Unskilled,” Gavin said.

“Sickening,” Dena said.

“Great fun. Exciting,” Scruggs said.

Ana snorted.

“It’s like being on a roller coaster ride,” Scruggs said.

Gavin unscrewed an access panel under the microwave and shone a flashlight. “Motor isn’t turning. Yes, like a roller coaster with the chance of sudden death.”

“Have you ever been on a roller coaster, Private?” Ana asked.

“In simulations.”

“This isn’t a simulation. This one, we might die. Probably will. But again, not important.” Ana faced Kay. “Assume we don’t know

anything about New Oregon or its history. Also, assume we don't care about New Oregon or its history. Or its present. Or its future. We care about delivering these weapons. Talk fast."

"Well, you need to at least understand..."

"Not big into understanding. Move on," Ana said.

Kay waved. "Fine. In a nutshell. We're a self-governing planet on the verge. A long ways from the Empire, but close to the Confeds. And closer to the Nats. Both are pushing out close to us. A majority of the population wants to stay independent. But there are two parties in our government. One, the Socialist Democrats of New Oregon. With substantial rural support, they are advocating for closer ties with the Nationalists. Another, the Republicans, are a front for the Confeds. They're strong in the cities. My group, the Federalists, we believe in freedom for all to choose without having to be tied to an external political entity, and we think that our freedom can best be demonstrated—"

"Boring," Ana said. "Too complicated. Talk faster."

Kay closed her eyes, took a deep breath. "We're having a civil war. My side versus the Socialist Democrats – the SoDems we call them. My side is an alliance—two groups, my group, the Federalists, and the Republicans."

Gavin dropped the access panel on the floor with a clatter. He cursed.

Ana picked it up and handed it back. "And you're losing?"

"How did you know?"

"Winners don't need weapons smuggled in," Ana said. "Why Confed weapons?"

"The Nats give the Socialist Democrats all the weapons they want. The Confeds gave the Republicans some weapons, but then they were cut off by the blockade. But now the Confeds will still at least sell us weapons."

Ana looked at Dirk. "You must have studied this at Navy school. Is this the truth? About the planet?"

"As I recall, from the most boring of lectures I had to attend at the academy a few years back, that the Empire guaranteed the independence of the planets in question. The idea was to end any possibility of a border war breaking out by accident, facilitate trade, and suppress piracy. The competing Empires agreed to patrol lines that wouldn't overlap, and they agreed to suppress piracy in the areas they patrolled, making the area safe for 'regular, legitimate commerce,' as my professor said. And the Empire guaranteed to come to the aid of any independent planets that felt their independence threatened. However, each great Empire was allowed to sponsor a plebiscite on planets in their zone of influence, to gauge the interest of

them in joining the larger political union. And as a further guarantee, the entire area was demilitarized, with all three great Empires pledging to embargo all military activity in the area. No new bases, no fortifications, no fleet activities, just anti-pirate patrols."

"Wow, that's a pretty comprehensive explanation," Kay said. "A great precis of the political situation on my home world."

"Interstellar diplomacy is a big interest of mine," Dirk said.

"Don't believe that for a second. I'm guessing a hot female instructor?"

"I'm insulted."

"He is, too," Gavin said. "He'd only do it for a really, really hot female instructor. Did you call her 'professor'? I mean, later, when—"

"Men," Kay said, "are very predictable."

"I'm not," Dirk said.

"Yes, you are. Fine, that's your idea of what's going on. Let me expand on your explanation. New Oregon was part of—is part of—a group of seven like-minded planets in the area. We were settled at the same time, same language groupings, similar but not identical culture. They were all smaller and poorer than us—we have the largest population and the most industry of the seven. We were fine until twenty years ago, then that treaty. The Confeds and the Nats carved us up between them. They both sent in agents, bought politicians, funded groups, that sort of thing. One week there would be riots for joining the Confederation, the next week for joining the Union of Nations – the Nats. There were plebiscites and counter plebiscites. At least one coup. Over the last twenty years, things have gone to the dogs. We've become a proxy battleground for the greater Empires, and they don't care how damaged we get in the process, provided we eventually get set up to be annexed. There's been three annexations after plebiscites, two outright occupations that were agreed to under pressure, one planet where everybody left, not that big a population, when it got too dangerous. That leaves us. We got a civil war. The Socialist Democrats campaigned on a platform of closer ties to the Nationalists. But they lost the last election, so they declared it invalid and started fighting. They have supplies and weapons from the Nats, some regular troops acting as advisers, and they started winning."

"So, you lost?"

"We started to," Kay said. "Then we went to the Confeds. Asked for weapons, sent them some money, asked for support against their enemies, the Nationalists. Pitted one against the other. They took our money and promised arms and support. They said they would sell us what we needed."

"So, now you're winning."

"Nope," Kay said. "Want to guess why?"

Dirk nodded. “You said, ‘took your money’ and ‘offered support,’ but you didn’t get it, did you? They kept the money.”

“Right in one,” Kay said. “Oh, they sent some. Some weapons, some ammunition, basic stuff. We need antiair and antitank weapons. More sophisticated stuff.”

“The Confeds won’t sell that to just any person off the street,” Gavin said.

“We’re not any person off the street,” Kay said. “We’re the sovereign planet of New Oregon, our independence guaranteed by galactic treaty, signed by, among others, your Emperor’s representative. Our system isn’t rich, but it isn’t destitute. We have money. We went out and bought weapons. We just can’t get them to us.”

“The embargo, the demilitarization agreement,” Dirk said. “No weapons for either side.”

“Correct, except that the Socialist Democrats—that’s our opponents—get as much as they wanted, smuggled in by Nationalist ships. We got the occasional Confed registered ship, but after the SoDems complained, we got nothing. The great Empires are embargoing everything now. Including your Empire.”

“To sum up,” Ana said, “you represent the elected government of New Oregon. Your coalition is you, the Federalist party, and the Republican party. The Republicans are a front for the Confederation and get some weapons in support, but that’s been blocked by the embargo. Your opponents are the Socialist Democrats, who are supported by the Nats, the Union of Nations, and get regular and substantial weapons shipments.”

“Yes,” Kay said. “There are some smaller elements, other parties, but they’re not all that important.”

“What’s our role in this?” Ana said.

“You like money?”

“Yes,” Dirk said. “Not ahead of everything, but I am fond of it.”

“You want money?”

Gavin answered. “It’s on my list.”

“And do you need money?”

“We do,” Lee said. “We’ve got repairs to do.”

“Good,” Kay said, sweeping her hands out. “Take this ship and everything in it. Run the blockade, land on New Oregon with these weapons, unload there. We’ll pay you what Cheong offered. In cash. What do you say?”

“Who has the spaceport and orbital infrastructure?” Ana asked. “Which side? Yours?”

“Them,” Kay said. “The spaceport, that is. No orbital infrastructure other than some comm and weather satellites. The Nat’s make regular

drops to the SoDems."

"How do you get weapons?" Ana asked. "Without a spaceport, that is."

"Small ships that can sneak in-system, hit orbit, drop and unload, then escape."

"Do the Nats have any antiship assets?" Dirk asked.

"You mean the Socialist Democrats, and not really. Some old cutters. The only way they're a danger is if you run into them by accident."

Gavin fussed with the panel with his screwdriver. The motor screeched, and everybody jumped. He reached in and shorted a wire, and the noise stopped.

"What's the problem?" Dirk said.

"The weapons embargo."

"Whose embargo?" Dirk asked. "You just said the Nats, or your Nats, the Socialist Democrats, don't have any space-based assets. Who is enforcing this embargo?"

"You're an Imperial officer, aren't you?" Kay asked. "Have I seen you before?"

"I was. And you haven't," Dirk said. "Who enforces this embargo?"

"In the interests of peace and prosperity in the verge," Kay said. "The Empire, the Nats, and the Confeds met and agreed on a demilitarized zone. Peaceful commerce. Suppression of piracy. Civilian interaction. No planetary military ships. No weapons. Full lockdown on arms shipments."

"Which means?" Ana said.

Kay pointed at Dirk. "His buddies enforce it. Imperial ships monitor and board all freighters going to New Oregon. If they find weapons, they assume you're smugglers or pirates. They space the whole crew right there."

***

"We can't survive an Imperial boarding," Dirk said.

"According to Scruggs, we can't even survive a scanning. Our scan profile doesn't match the class on our beacon," Dena said. "And we're in a freighter. We can't outrun anything. Even backwoods country girls know that."

Dirk leaned back and stretched his head. "If the geometry is right, you don't have to outrun anything. You just need to be in the right place, and they need to be in the wrong place."

"Learned that in your fancy officer school, did you, Navy?" Ana asked.

"Well, yes. Yes, I did." Dirk said. "I paid attention in that one."

“Did that class also have an attractive female instructor?” Kay asked, sloshing her cup of basic.

Scruggs covered a giggle. Dena looked at Kay. “You figured that out already.”

“I know his type,” Kay said.

Gavin connected another wire and started the microwave. This time, a high-pitched whine filled the lounge. Everyone winced. Kay and Scruggs covered their ears, and the microwave shorted out with a flash and a pop.

Kay removed her hands from her head. “It’s the ground wire. Check the ground wire.”

“It’s not the ground wire,” Gavin said. “It’s something with the motor.”

“Well, you’re the big engineer. Captain Dirk, you sound like you’re considering this.”

“If the geometry is against you, sometimes, it’s impossible to intercept a planetary bound ship. I did learn that in officer training.”

“They taught you how to set up smuggling routes?”

“Nope. They taught us how to suppress smuggling,” Dirk said. “I need a chart. Lee, come with me to the control room, please. Show me what your course would be into the system.”

Lee and Dirk climbed up to the control room, leaving the others to stare at each other. Rocky jumped up onto Ana’s lap. Ana rubbed behind his ears. Gavin kept fussing with the microwave.

“It’s the green wire,” Kay said.

“It’s not the green wire,” Gavin said. “I think the motor is shot.”

“Motor’s fine. It’s a ground fault, Big Engineer,” Kay said. She leaned in and patted Rocky. “Ana. Is that short for something?”

“Anastasios,” Ana said.

“That means resurrection, in the Greek,” Kay said.

“Speak Greek, do you?” Ana asked.

“Some,” Kay said. “I heard Senior Centurion, is that right?”

“Yes.”

“I’m Kay.” She held out her hand.

Ana reached past Rocky and shook. “You can call me Senior Centurion Anastasios.”

“I’ll call you Ana, like everyone else. Unless you want me to call you old man, like the children here.”

Ana furrowed his brow. “How old are you?”

“Old enough to know better. Young enough not to care. As a senior centurion, I’ll bet you know a lot of weapons systems. Ship-based. Land-based. Artillery. I’ll bet you know how to operate Confederation systems as well.”

“Centurion knows all sorts of things,” Scruggs said. “Small arms and

weapons and knives. He knows how to use ship sensors."

"Private," Ana said.

"He knows Imperial systems. And he's been on board all sorts of navy ships. National destroyers. Confederation auxiliary cruisers. He's even been on board Confederation and National troop carriers."

"Confed troop carriers?" Kay asked. "Interesting."

Gavin flipped open another panel and latched it up, then poked inside. "Ask him if he was defending them, attacking them, or dropping from them."

Kay raised her eyebrows at Ana.

"All of that," Ana said. "Private. She's not interested."

"Centurion says he taught hundreds of troops in his career. He once said he could teach anyone to fire a gun if he had enough time."

"That's enough, Private," Ana said. "Ms. Kay isn't interested."

"We've got a lot of Confederation weapons," Kay said. "They were happy to take our money earlier, sell us things. Not so good on the training. We could use a good trainer."

"Pass," Ana said.

"It would be a challenge," Kay said.

"Still pass. I've had plenty of challenges in my career. I don't need any more."

"We pay well."

"Have to live to spend your pay. And I'll tell you what, even without hearing all the details, if your opponents have regular arms shipments and you don't, your little rebellion is doomed. And you're doomed, and if we're there, we're doomed as well. Doom. All doom."

Gavin reached inside the panel and poked. The lounge lights flickered and died.

Dirk and Lee climbed back into the darkened lounge. "What's going on?"

"We're talking about doom. I'm against it," Ana said. "They're doomed to become another Confederation protectorate."

"I meant the lights," Dirk said.

"It's the ground wire in the microwave," Kay said. "You have a ground fault. It's shorting everything out."

"We do not," Gavin said. He stuck his head and shoulders into the open cabinet.

"The ground wire is the green one," Kay said.

"I know the ground is green," Gavin said.

"So, fix it."

"The green wire isn't the problem," Gavin said. He squirmed out of the cabinet but brushed the latched panel on the way by. It dropped and slammed into his head. "Emperor's scrawny calves."

"Do you need assistance, Engineer?" Dirk asked.

“Just need to change some settings,” Gavin said.

Dirk shook his head and brought up a course plot on the wall mounted display. “Lee and I have uncovered a few interesting facts,” Dirk said. “How soon do you need these weapons?”

“Yesterday,” Kay said. “But what are you proposing?”

“If it takes a month or a little less, will you deal?”

“I’ll deal. But no payment until you land them on New Oregon,” Kay said.

“Pilot,” Ana said. “We don’t have a good read on how competent these rebels are. They could be overrun any day. Every day. Before we get there.”

“We’re not rebels,” Kay said. “It’s our planet. We don’t want to join the Nats. Or the Confeds, for that matter. And we won’t be overrun right away. These weapons are late, but my people are expecting them, so they’re holding on. Mr. Big Engineer, can I have your screwdriver?”

“Not now, lady,” Gavin said. “I’m working.”

The lights flickered on, then died.

“We can all see that, yes.” Kay said. She climbed next to Gavin and glanced inside the main panel below the microwave. “Screwdriver, please.”

“What are you going to do?” Gavin said.

“We can jump through a whole lot of hoops and still find out that we won’t get paid at the end if your people cave in,” Ana said.

“We need those weapons. And we’ll pay,” Kay said. She stuck her hand out to Gavin.

“Much as I normally disagree with the centurion,” Lee said. “He’s our military expert. If he says you’re doomed, then you’re doomed.”

“He has incomplete information. Mr. Big Engineer, do I have to wrestle you for that screwdriver?”

Gavin blew out his breath but handed it to her.

Kay switched back to the original panel under the microwave and reached in with the screwdriver in her left hand. She stretched, stepped up, and braced one foot on the table. Grabbing with her right, she pushed inside with her left. Her face strained, and she grunted.

Something inside the panel clicked, and the lights flashed back on. Kay pulled her arm out and transferred the screwdriver to a belt loop. She opened the food tray cabinet, pulled out a red, green, and blue tray, and slid it into the microwave. She tapped the Start button. The microwave hummed, but the grinding noise was gone. They sat silently for the sixty seconds it took to heat the meal. After it bonged, Kay pulled the steaming tray out and set it on the floor. “Rocky, good boy. Come, eat.”

Rocky jumped off Ana’s lap, and slurped up his meal, tail wagging.

Kay set the screwdriver down in the center of the table. “We can hold. We can pay. We can fight. Give us the tools, and we’ll finish the job.” She stepped to the screen and pointed at the display. “Explain how you’re going to land our guns.”

Chapter Fifteen

"Where did you get the priests' robes?" Subprefect Lionel asked. "Did you make them up yourself?"

He and Tribune Devin's steward, Imin, were following the tribune down the passenger liners debarkation corridor. The three had traveled to Jaytee on a high-speed liner and arrived at Cargo-13. Except for the Tribune, they were dressed in plain blue coveralls over military skinsuits with only standard Imperial fittings—comm, collar and boots, and both wore military holsters with shock sticks. The Tribune wore robes over his skinsuit.

"I could never make anything like that," Imin said. He fingered his belt. "This is never going to work. We'll be found out and jailed. If not shot by the locals. Can we buy some sort of weapon when we're here?"

"You've got a shock stick," Lionel said. "That's enough for close work. It won't accidentally blast holes in station bulkheads. And anything past touching distance, you'll never hit it. I've seen your qualification records. You can't shoot for tabbo testicles."

"Where did you see my qualification records?"

"I'm the deputy commander of the ship. I see everything."

"Everything the tribune wants you to see, at least. Maybe my shooting qualifications are better than you'd expect."

"The tribune wouldn't lie to me about your qualifications."

"Bet you didn't think he'd demand you escort him on a freighter into Confederation space, either."

"He didn't demand. I volunteered."

"Why?"

"I'm an idiot."

Imin picked up a hand case at the on-deck luggage rack. Devin had walked ahead. "What really happened in that fire? The one that the tribune never mentions."

"Not important."

"Lots of rumors."

"You shouldn't put any trust in rumors."

"I don't. I do put trust in the fact that it appears that you're the only person outside of the Imperial family who can argue with him and not get spaced. Maybe not even them. He never shares why with anybody."

They turned left and lined up with the other passengers at station

customs. A green-jacketed employee of Cargo-13 was scanning travel chips.

Lionel produced three chips. “How much better a shot are you than your records would suggest?”

“Better enough that a ranged weapon wouldn’t go amiss,” Imin said.

“How do we get one?”

“Ask the Tribune.”

“I will after he gets arrested at this checkpoint for impersonating a priest of Jove,” Lionel said.

Devin had arrived at the check-in desk. He turned. “Brother Lionel, we will need our papers. It appears they have little respect for the priesthood here.”

Lionel and Imin walked forward. Lionel handed the chips to the frowning desk clerk.

“I have great respect for your order, Reverend Father,” the clerk said. “If it was up to me, you could go about your business. But, well, we have procedures, and we share the station with those others.” He nodded to his right.

A man leaned against the wall, arms crossed, wearing a Confederation uniform. He locked eyes with the Tribune.

“Him?” Devin pointed. “That one? Is this a Confederation station now?”

The clerk scanned another chip. “It’s not. But we have an agreement. We share the station.”

“So, it’s his fault, then?” Devin gestured at the Confed officer. “You, sir, you. Yes, you. Confederation officer, come here.”

The Confed officer frowned at Devin and unlocked his arms.

“Come, come.” Devin snapped his fingers. “We are holding up the line. Come here and sort this out.”

The Confederation officer stomped over. His hand dropped to his belt. Like Imin and Lionel, he carried a shock stick.

“What do you want, Imperial?”

“The correct address is Reverend Father,” Devin said, “But if you are not a believer, you may call me priest. We wish access to this station.”

“You only get access to this station if I say so,” the Confed said.

Devin shook his head. He raised his voice so all the passengers in line behind could hear, and all the onlookers as well. “Not so. Your governing council claims they are civilized men. As such, they have granted all consecrated priests of Jove unrestricted access to your domains. My providing you my papers is a simple courtesy to this gentleman here. Once he returns them, we shall be about our business on the station.”

“What is your business on the station, Priest?” the Confed asked.

Devin raised his eyebrows. The clerk’s eyes flicked to the officer, then he hid a smile. “Could you share your reasons for visiting our humble station, Reverend Father?”

“Of course.” Devin beamed at the gathering crowd. “At the orders of the Pontifex Maximus, I travel the outlying systems, spreading the word. There is a temple here that has never been consecrated. I plan to offer thanks in the temple and give sacrifice and perform a formal consecration. Perhaps preach a sermon or two if Jove’s word moves me.”

“How long will you be staying, Reverend Father?” the clerk asked.

“Until my work is done,” Devin said. “I shall pass now.”

“Not so fast,” the Confed officer said. “You’re coming in for questioning with me.”

Lionel and Imin stepped to flank Devin, hands on their shock sticks.

“I am not,” Devin said.

“Don’t make me call a squad to come and get you,” the Confed officer said.

“Hey!” the clerk said. “You’re not allowed to have squads over here. I’m calling security.” He spoke into his comm. The crowd growled and shuffled. Yells of “Leave him alone” and “Let them in” rang out.

“If you call a squad, there will be fighting,” Devin said. “My guards will resist. You will have to kill them if you want to lay hands on me. Nothing else will suffice. I have given no offense, committed no crime. Your council will find in my favor, eventually. They will be embarrassed by this action, and to assuage that embarrassment they will execute you, your squad, and half your companions on this station.”

“You’ll still be dead,” the Confed said.

“Of course,” Devin said. “But you say that like it matters to us.”

The Confed officer wavered. “What does his ID say.”

“Says he’s Devin, a priest of Jove. Imperial signature. The code checks out.”

The Confed pointed at Lionel and Imin. “What about Tweedle-Dee and Tweedle-Dum here?”

Both men moved, but Devin held up his hand. “Calm, my brothers. These two are my guards. Assigned by the high priest.”

“Well?”

“Identification says they’re guards,” the clerk said.

The crowd was growing restless.

Devin crossed his arms. “Officer, call your guards. Fight us or stand aside. Talking is tiresome.”

“I think you’re fake,” the Confed said. “Not a real priest.”

"Not a real priest?" Devin said.

"Nope. Bless me," the Confed said.

"What?"

"A blessing." The Confed raised his voice. "Be quiet, everybody. This priest of Jove here is going to bless us all. Give us the blessings. You haven't been here before, Priest, have you?"

"It has not been my privilege," Devin said. "I plan to visit the temple immediately upon finishing these tiring discussions."

"Well," the Confed said, removing his hat, "then, how about the prayer of consecration. All of you, uncover and bow your heads. The reverend father, Devin, priest of Jove, will give the prayer of consecration, for the station. Your prayer, reverend?"

Hats and helmets disappeared from heads, and those without bowed. The station officer straightened to attention.

Lionel sidled up to Imin. "You take the Confed. I'll take that poor station bastard. We can't have him calling more security. Then we run."

"Run where? Into the station? Off? We're blown."

"We can take the liner, fly out of here."

"You and what engineering crew? It's so big we couldn't even undock it without—"

"Gentlemen, have you finished?" Devin called. He climbed up onto the clerk's counter and raised his hands in benediction. "We're all waiting."

"Sorry, Reverend, won't happen again."

"Good. Jupiter Optimus Maximus—or whatever name you wish to be called by—on this auspicious day, we gather..."

Imin and Lionel listened as Devin carried on, reciting the prayer for dedication of a structure. It was a long prayer, and he spent a good ten minutes thanking Jove and the other gods for this day. He even threw in a description of the Emperor and Empire that made the Confed frown and the crowd laugh.

After the first two minutes, they took their hands off their weapons.

At the five-minute point, Lionel leaned into Imin and whispered, "It sounds like the real prayer."

"It is," Imin said. "I heard it back home once when they built the new temple on Acheri."

"Does he have a recording playing in his ear?"

"His comm isn't in. He's memorized it."

"Who memorizes a prayer that is only used once a year?"

"Only used once a year by somebody else."

Both men traded confused looks and waited for the prayer to finish. Halfway through, a station security squad shoved through one door, then took off their helmets and listened. Two more Confed officers

arrived from another door, took in the crowd and the station squad, and quietly left.

After fifteen minutes of precise and detailed thanks, detailed quotes of scriptures, and specific benedictions, Devin closed and blessed everyone.

The crowd clapped.

"Thank you, my children," Devin said. "We go now to the temple, unless there are any official reasons we cannot."

The clerk smiled and shook his head. The Confed official turned and walked back to his post. Devin climbed down, gestured at his guards, and proceeded through the crowd. It parted as he walked by, dispensing greetings and blessings.

Imin and Lionel walked two steps behind. They scanned for trouble, but if anybody had ill intent, they were hiding it.

"The robes are his," Imin said.

"What?" Lionel said.

"You asked where I got them. I didn't. He had them in his closet, in the back."

"For a party?"

"They're tailored. They fit him perfectly."

"He has religious robes, and he memorized insanely long prayers. Who does that?"

Imin shrugged. "Maybe he's a priest?"

They walked—or more properly processed—through the corridors. Word had spread, and Devin stopped to pray or grant a blessing to anybody who asks.

"This is creepy," Imin said, stopping as people kneeled while Devin prayed over them.

"The tribune looks... serene," Lionel said.

"Never ever have the words 'tribune' and 'serene' been together in the same sentence," Imin said. "Unconcerned, or more properly uncaring, or uninterested are the usual ones. Or irritated, annoyed, those are words we use."

"It is creepy," Lionel said. "What do we do if that Confed comes back with friends?"

"You don't want to die in the tribune's service?"

"I expect to die in the tribune's service. I just want it to be with a weapon in my hand firing at my enemies, not run over by religious groupies."

"Religious people don't have groupies."

"This one does. Look at that woman asking for a blessing."

"He's just laying hands on her."

"Laying hands?"

"On her head."

“From her expression, I think she’d like his hands somewhere else.”

“She does look like she wants to tug her shirt open.”

“What does he do next? Bless her breasts?”

Devin had heard them muttering. He turned. “Is there a problem, brothers?”

“Sir—I mean, Reverend Father,” Lionel said. “We’re concerned about your safety. Not from these people. From the Confeds.”

A squat, dark-haired man with a long black coat stood and scowled. “The Confeds better not come down here. We’ll deal with them if they do. This is our station, not theirs.”

Others in the crowd rumbled agreement.

“Yes, sir, but it’s our job to protect him. We don’t even have guns. All we have is these shock sticks.”

The man scanned the crowd. “Julix, come out here. Bring my case.” A woman carrying a long case pushed through the crowd. “Open it up,” he said.

The women popped it open, revealing handguns and long guns in a foam case.

“Whatever the reverend father’s people think they need, I can help.” He raised his hands. “And for the clergy, ten percent discount.”

An hour later, they arrived at the local temple. It was standing room only. Word of a consecrated priest’s arrival had spread, and every bench was full, with others standing at the walls. All stood as Devin marched down the main aisle. Half were genetic Jovians.

Imin and Lionel waddled along behind him. They had acquired two handguns each, as well as knives, smoke bombs, and, in Imin’s case, two grenades.

“I’m just saying that you seem very well informed on grenade models for a ship’s steward,” Lionel said.

“You learn things in the navy.”

“You actually drooled on the gauss rifle that guy showed you.”

“It’s a beautiful weapon,” Imin said. “Not much good on a station, though.”

“Are you sure you weren’t a marine at some point?” Lionel asked.

“That’s low, even for you, Subprefect,” Imin said.

They quieted as Devin stepped up to the podium. The sermon lasted an hour. Thanks to the gods. Gratitude for all they had. A wish for peace. A discussion of the work put into creating the temple. All good stuff.

He launched into his main topic, duty. Duty to your friends, your family, your Empire, your god. He spoke of the need for dedication to an ideal, to upholding principles, laws, keeping the faith in times of despair. The need to stay true to your ideals.

Imin was blinking back tears by the time it was done. Lionel had

cried at one point. “If I hadn’t already been in the navy,” Lionel said, “I would have gone out and joined again.”

“Where did he learn to be like that? He sounded like a real priest.”

“He sounded like the best, most sincere priest I’ve ever heard speak, a priest that believes in the Empire as the guarantor of universal laws. The type of priest you’d lay down your life for.”

Imin raised an eyebrow.

“If you tell anybody I said that,” Lionel said, “I’ll have you killed.”

“I don’t think I’ll have to,” Imin said. “I think, someday, you’ll say it yourself.”

Devin finished his speech and stepped down to move among the congregation. After half an hour of this, the local Jovian Clan chief suggested they step to the side room for some refreshments before heading to the quarters he provided.

“Of course, of course,” Devin said. “A break would be nice. My guards will have to accompany me. Rules you understand.”

The clan chief ushered them into a side room. Snacks and wine lined the side table. Two other Jovians stood inside. When Devin’s group entered, they gave the crossed-chest Imperial salute. The three men reflexively returned it.

“These are the men, Tribune,” the clan chief said.

Lionel reached for his weapon, but Devin raised his hand. “The clan chief and I are old friends.”

“Your guards?”

“One is my executive officer, the other is my steward. They have my full confidence. Are these the two men?” Devin pointed at the two Jovians.

“They are.”

“Well”—Devin nodded—“a pleasure to meet you. Now tell me everything, omitting no detail, about this woman, Lee, who came into your shop.”

Chapter Sixteen

“Four jumps,” Dirk said. “Rather than two. Three more after this one. Instead of jumping directly to New Oregon, we jump down, then across, then up, then come in from the other side.”

“The Nationalists’ side?” Kay asked. “Why would we want to do that?”

“Do we need more fuel, Skipper?” Gavin asked.

“We have enough for one more jump after this. When we come out of jump in the next system, we’re still outside of the jump limit for the star and the planets. We spend just long enough to check the systems, change our aspect, then jump down, relative to the galactic plane. That system—Cather? Cathar?” Dirk tapped the screen. “Doesn’t matter. Starts with a C, only has one planet. Marginally habitable, just outside the edge of the Goldilocks zone. Close in to the sun. But an elliptical orbit. Right now, there’s liquid water. We can land and fill up.”

“What does marginally habitable mean?” Scruggs asked.

“Hot. Oceans. Rock. Sand. Sulfur.”

“Will we need breathers or suits?”

“There’s plenty of atmo, so just breathers. And it will be cooler. Pleasant, actually. As long as it doesn’t rain.”

“What happens if it rains?”

“Some sulfuric acid. Might be toxic to people.”

“And to spaceships,” Gavin said, closing the microwave panels. “Um, Miss Kay, how did you know it was a ground fault?”

“Had to be with all those shorts. Something wasn’t grounded right.”

“How do you know so much about electric systems on freighters?” Gavin asked.

“It’s a common fault on these types of freighters. I’ll bet you have current leaks elsewhere you haven’t found yet. Any other strange electrical problems on the ship?”

“No, there isn’t...” Gavin stared into space. “Not in the lounge. The sensor circuits, though...”

“You work on that,” Kay said. “It’s pronounced kay-ther, Pilot Dirk. I know that planet. How will sucking up sulfuric acid instead of water help get my guns to New Oregon?”

“Because the orbit is so eccentric. At this time in their cycle, the temperature will have dropped, and the clouds will be regular water. We can pass through and land. The ocean has sulfur, but not enough

to clog our systems. After we load up with water, we do two more jumps, and we're on the Nationalist side of your planet."

Kay tapped the screen. "There's a Nationalist comm relay station in the Cather system. Three of them in total. Each at a different L-5 Point."

"It's just a beacon and a message relay, according to the Imperial sailing directions," Dirk said. "No military sensors. No radars. They record passing beacons and store, send, and receive messages. We won't send messages, and we won't trip our beacon. We'll jump in, coast to orbit, drop and tank up. Take off, coast from orbit, and jump again. We'll time it, so they can't see us lighting our drives."

"You said they had no radar," Ana said. "Why avoid them?"

"For safety. In case the Imperial sailing directions are wrong."

"We have a full set of Imperial sailing directions?" Gavin asked. "I didn't know that. I thought we had a commercial package."

"We do," Dirk said.

"How'd we get them? They're expensive. And hard to find."

"Are they?"

"Very. How did we pay for them?"

Dirk pointed at Lee. "Navigator got them, back before we... acquired—"

"Stole?" Dena asked.

"Acquired," Dirk said. "Back before we acquired the ship."

"Huh," Gavin said. "I thought money was a big problem with the... former owners—"

"You mean 'rightful,' don't you?" Dena said.

"Former owners," Dirk said. "Regardless of how the Navigator got them, we've got them now. We can track the planet's orbit, the Nationalists station's orbit, and where we need to land. We can get in, refuel, and get out, then two jumps to the far side of New Oregon."

"Where your friends, Imperial Pilot Dirk, will be waiting for us. And patrolling."

"Yes, they will," Dirk said. "Patrolling extensively. Have been for a while."

"We don't know where they will be patrolling or how to avoid them," Kay said. "How does this help me?"

"I know their patrol pattern," Dirk said.

"Because you can read minds?" Dena asked. "I can tell everyone, from personal experience, that Dirk can't read minds. You have to make your intentions clear, and even then, he doesn't catch on. You pretty much have to put his hands—"

"It's in your navy books," Ana said. "It's some sort of standard procedure, standard patrol line. You learned how to suppress pirates at that school. And smugglers. And there has to be some sort of

standard Patrol 101 class. With guidelines for how you plan your courses."

Dirk nodded. "Lee showed me the planetary system and our entry points. I programmed the course that I would have set up as watch officer on a frigate if I was told to patrol for smugglers. I put in the default parameters. There's a random element, but one ship can't be everywhere all the time. One of the requirements is that you do have to be everywhere at least some of the time. You have to be able to scan the whole inner and outer system on an ongoing basis. Imperial ships need fuel as well, and they have to be able to rendezvous with other ships. Watch this."

Dirk played with the screen, and the planet New Oregon appeared, along with moons and systems. Dirk pointed to the planet. "At some point, unless the patrolling ship is a battleship, which wouldn't come out here, they would have landed at the spaceport, for spares, fuel, recreation, or just boredom. Once they lift, they have several patterns to choose from. Alpha search, Beta, a bunch. I put them all in and had the system project future courses over time. Check this out."

Dirk tapped his comm, and this time, the display was covered by course plots. "The patrol programs are well thought out. They do cover every part of the system, look at the planet from every aspect to facilitate overhead surveillance, and cover each location multiple times. But it is a pattern. Some places we pass over ten times in a given time period, some only once."

Dirk maneuvered the screen controls. Two areas shaded into light-green. "Those green areas, a single patrolling ship, is ten times less likely to scan us there than others. Dark green, a hundred times less likely."

"But it could still be there," Gavin said. "And don't the smugglers know this?"

"Smugglers don't have renegade Imperial officers to set up their courses," Ana said. "Well done, Navy. Using your skills for good. Our good. See how much smoother things go when you try to do your job?"

Dirk looked at Kay. "Head to the system, jump to the back side, sneak past the patrols, land your guns. Cash on delivery?"

"When we get the guns."

"Outstanding," Ana said.

***

Heavyweight Items completed the jump, and the blue jump light disappeared from the screens.

"Contact," Lee said. "National Beacons in-system."

She and Dirk were alone in the control room.

"Can you see all three?" Dirk asked.

"Yes. Steady pulses. Oh, that's a surprise."

"What now?"

"Three National Beacons, broadcasting message traffic capability. And a single Imperial Beacon as well, also broadcasting message capability. Imperial one is purely for messages, and it's way out-system, opposite direction from the National Beacons."

"What's an Imperial Beacon doing this far out?" Dirk asked.

Lee shrugged. "Somebody decided there were enough messages going in this direction, and enough Imperial ships going by that it was worth a message drop."

Dirk bit his lip. "Things change. We on course?"

Lee tapped her screens. "No, Pilot. We drifted during the jump. Stand by for an updated course."

Dirk muttered a curse and put his hands on his lap.

Gavin floated through the aft hatch and grasped the back of Dirk's seat. With the jump drive off and the main engines silent, they were drifting. "Can I shut down engineering now?"

"Not yet," Dirk said. "We drifted. We need to change aspect and fire the engines for a few seconds."

"Hope they don't see us," Gavin said.

"They won't, provided we do it now," Dirk said. "Too far away."

"You hope."

"I know," Dirk said. "Lee?"

"On your screen now, Pilot."

Dirk examined his display, then slapped a button and took his hands off. The computer yawed the ship twelve degrees and pitched it up three. The console flashed green.

"Hang on," Dirk said and slapped another button.

The main engines engaged for two seconds.

Gavin hung on the back of the seat till the engines stopped. "How long?"

"Six hours, seven minutes till rendezvous," Lee said. "Then we're in orbit and screened and Pilot can land us."

"All he did was tap two buttons," Kay said from behind. She had snuck in while they were maneuvering. "I knew pilots were lazy."

"It's not tapping the buttons that's important," Dirk said. "It's knowing which ones to tap."

"Looks like the one the navigator put on your screen," she said. "Navigator Lee, I hear you're the medic as well."

"She does both," Gavin said. "She's good at both."

"Better navigator than you are an engineer in my book."

"Don't care about your book. We done, Skipper?"

"Yes, shut everything down." Dirk tapped the ship wide intercom.

“Maneuvering over. Zero G for the next six hours.”

Gavin pulled himself down the corridor to the aft engineering spaces.

“So, what do we do for the next six hours seven minutes, pilot?” Kay asked.

“For the next six hours and”—Dirk glanced at his screen—“six hours five minutes, we do not fire the engines or the thrusters, no outbound transmissions, no tripping of beacons, no major heat or atmo dumps, and no internal comms. All engineering equipment shut down. All sensors offline.”

“Can we eat dinner?” Kay asked.

“Cold packs only. Lee, you’ve got the controls. Wake me in four hours.” Dirk climbed out of his seat, paused, turned back, and typed a lock code into his board, then pulled past Kay. “I’m going to check with the others.”

“You always lock your board, Pilot?” Kay asked.

“It’s good security.”

“You don’t trust your crew?”

“I don’t trust you,” Dirk said.

He and Kay left the control room, talking. Lee waited till the voices disappeared, then looked over her shoulder. Dirk and Kay weren’t visible. She pointed the transmission antenna at the Imperial Beacon, put in a long code, and sent a message download request.

The beacon would process her code and, if there were any personal messages listed for her, would include them in the next omni-directional beacon broadcast. She wouldn’t have to do anything else. The ship’s systems would receive and record them, and she could decode them at her leisure. With luck, nobody—Imperial, National, or crew—would know that she’d received anything.

***

“Dena, what are you doing?” Dirk asked.

Dena climbed into the lounge, dressed in gym shorts and a sports bra, carrying a towel.

“It’s my shower day. I’m taking it,” Dena said. “You mugs won’t give me credit for it if I don’t.”

“We’re trying to hide from the Nationalists.”

“And I’m trying not to stink. Go away unless you want to watch. Do you?”

“Don’t run the pump. There should be enough pressure in the system without starting it. Once you’re done, stay in your cabin till we hit the planet.”

“Funny. He used to want to watch,” Dena said, floating away.

Kay watched her go and turned to Dirk. “Attractive woman.”

“She is,” Dirk agreed.

“Why did she end it?”

“End what?”

“The affair you were having before I got here.”

“What makes you think we were having an affair?”

“I’m not an idiot,” Kay said. “You’re male, and I see what she looks like.”

“She’s a crew member.”

“No doubt you hired her for her skills in electrical repair. That’s why she dresses like that, makes you think of power supplies.” She stopped floating in front of Scruggs door. “Going to see what this one looks like in her underwear as well.”

“Already seen it,” Dirk said. “And she’s too young for me, and I’m her captain.”

“Yet you were Dena’s captain,” Kay said.

“Not at the time.” Dirk banged on the door. “Scruggs?”

“Come in, Pilot,” Scruggs called.

Dirk slid the door open. Scruggs was floating near her bed, wearing more than underwear, hooked on with one toe. Parts of a disassembled revolver floated with her. Rocky the Whippet lay extended next to her, floating on his back, relaxed with the null gravity. His teeth-baring growl at Dirk turned to a happy yip and a tail wag as he saw Kay. His wagging tail caused him to roll, but he didn’t stop.

“No electronics at all for six hours. No ship entertainment, no microwave, nothing that sends out a signal while we slip by the Nats.”

“Understood, Pilot,” Scruggs said. She tapped her comm and arranged the revolver parts.

“Timing yourself for stripping and assembly?” Kay asked.

“My record is seventy-five seconds,” Scruggs said. “But Centurion says I should be able to do it in less than thirty. He says his record is twenty-five.”

“He does, does he?” Kay said. She floated over to Rocky, hooked a finger on a grab bar, and scratched his stomach with the other. Rocky’s tail swished. “Good boy. Gooood boy. Like that, do you?”

“He likes his belly scratched,” Scruggs said.

“Most men do,” Kay said. “Your revolver. How about I give it a try and you time me?”

“This is where I came in,” Dirk said. “You two girls have fun.”

“We’ll talk girl things. Hair, makeup, and combat loads. Have fun pilot.”

Dirk edged out and slid the door shut. He pulled himself down a level to the second hab unit and knocked on the centurion’s door.

“Enter,” Ana said.

Dirk slid the door open. Ana was stretched out on his bed, his comm propped on his chest.

"We're running dark," Dirk said. "The National message platforms are where we expected them to be, so our course is good. But no sensors, pumps, ship electronics, whatever. Your comm is okay, though."

"Wow, Navy, you mean my handheld device that lacks enough power to broadcast any distance, that's hidden inside a metal spaceship, that shields its emissions regardless, is okay to use in low-power mode? I'm so glad that you told me that. Especially since those Nat platforms are message platforms, not sensor ones. Or so you say."

"I'm telling everybody. I want to make sure everybody knows what emissions control means. Not everybody does."

"Taking this officer in charge thing seriously for a change. What's gotten into you? You've been acting like a real pilot for the last while. Taking command. Giving orders. Regular showers. It's very unlike you."

"We need to take this smuggler runaway thing more seriously. We're criminals now. If I'm going to be a criminal, I want to be a smart, organized one."

"Outstanding. Great leadership moment there, Navy. After that speech, I'll follow you everywhere."

"Your sarcasm can be tiring, Centurion."

"It's not sarcasm. I will follow you. I have an unhealthy sense of morbid fascination with what messes you can get us into. Sometimes, you surprise me."

"I don't like surprises."

"Me neither." Ana flipped the reader off and sat up. "Did you get a good look at those National message platforms?"

"You know our sensors suck. All we got was the beacon before we went dark. Why do you ask?"

"I told you. Morbid curiosity."

"You think they're really sensor platforms?"

"Would have been nice to put a telescope on them before you cut all the power."

"Does it matter? Either they are or they aren't. If they are, they saw us, and we're in big trouble."

"A very fatalistic attitude." Ana stretched. "I'm more and more proud of you all the time. Another question."

"Very querulous you are, Centurion. Why all the questions?"

"We have some privacy here."

"The crew might not like my answers?"

"They definitely won't like the questions. Did you have any problems using those charts that Lee loaded up? And the sailing

directions?"

"No, they're just like the ones that I used in the navy."

"That's because they *are* the ones you used in the navy. Those are Imperial navy charts."

"No, they're not."

"Restricted, military-use-only charts, that our skinny Jovian navigator somehow acquired and loaded on our stolen ship."

"You're a ground pounder. You know nothing about naval charts."

"Just a dumb old centurion, that's me. Sitting back here, alone in my room. Reading dirty novels to pass the time. Certainly, can't compete with a highly educated naval officer like you."

"I've never seen commercial charts," Dirk said. He rubbed his face. "Not that I know of. They would look different, wouldn't they."

"I've seen both. Those don't look like the commercial charts I've seen in the past. They look like the military ones. Imperial military."

"Seen other military's charts, Centurion?"

"You can ask the Jovian where she got them if you want."

"Is that a good idea?"

"Absolutely not. She might tell us."

Dirk rubbed his forehead and sighed. "Let's keep this little talk between ourselves."

"Charts? What are those? Never heard of them," Ana said. "Now, if you asked for—"

BOOM.

"What was that?" Dirk said.

"Came from above. One of the rooms."

Dirk flipped the door open and dove out and up into the central corridor. Ana followed. Dirk pulled himself into the main hab unit and sniffed.

Smoke. A revolver.

Dena came out of the shower, wearing her shorts and sports bra, her hair still wet. "That came from Scruggs's room."

The three slid over, and Dirk banged on the door. "Scruggs," Dirk said.

Scruggs opened the door and grinned at them. "That was outstanding! Centurion, Miss Kay reassembled my revolver in seventeen seconds!"

"Good for Miss Kay," Ana said. "And then you shot her? Good for you."

"No, Centurion. She said that the only way to be sure that you reassembled it correctly was to fire it as part of the test. We just sent a frangible into the wall."

Kay floated next to Scruggs. "The young woman does well. I'll show her a few tricks, then I think we can cut her time in half."

“Perhaps without firing inside the ship, next time,” Dirk said.

“Train like we fight,” Kay said. “And it’s not like anybody can hear us.”

Dena looked in Kay’s face, then back at Ana. “It sounds like the old man talking, but you’re not nearly as ugly. I’m confused.”

“Gotta be ready for a fight when we land,” Kay said.

“You said we were delivering the weapons to a group of your friends in an area where they were in control,” Dirk said.

“Oh, they are in control. Or were when I left. But they were in… contact with Nationalist supplied forces. There was quite a bit of back and forth there. I’ve been gone a long time. Things might have changed.”

“So, you’re saying our ‘secure landing zone’ might not be so secure?”

Kay grinned. “Skilled smugglers like yourselves should have no problems if we need to land somewhere different or land under fire.”

“You didn’t think to mention this earlier,” Ana said.

“Where’s the fun in that?” Kay said.

“Emperor’s hairy toes,” Dirk said.

Scruggs grabbed a floating Rocky, pulled him over, and gave him a kiss. “Rocky, buddy, we’re going to war! Adventure awaits!”

“Outstanding,” Ana said.

Chapter Seventeen

Heart's Desire settled onto the rocky plateau on the bluff above a lake, two hours before major-primary sunrise. A red sun drifted low on the far horizon, making every shadow long. Black-and-yellow rock, stained with green-and-red patches, stretched into the distance until they reached cone-shaped hills peaking over the horizon. The lake wasn't frozen, but yellow snow blanketed shaded areas.

Steam surrounded the bottom of the ship as the ramp came down. Dena and Scruggs stumbled down to the bottom. Both stepped onto the rocks, bent at the waist, and puked.

Dena recovered first.

"Oh, that stinks." She wiped her mouth and drank from a water bottle, then handed it to Scruggs and put on her breather.

Scruggs wiped her face, then drank. She put on her own breather and adjusted the comm connections. "That was a good idea, not eating before the drop."

"Used to do that when I went sailing. If you know you're going to puke, don't make it harder on yourself."

"This atmo stinks."

"At least we have pressure," Dena said. "No skinsuit needed."

Rocky the Whippet stepped down the ramp but stopped and sniffed. He sneezed twice and wagged his tail but didn't move.

Scruggs waved a modified breather at him. "Here you go, boy!" Rocky wagged his tail even harder.

"Smart dog," Ana said, walking down the ramp, his rifle over his shoulder, his emergency pack on his back. "Recognizes that sulfur isn't good for you. Like him more every day. Coommm-urrggh-com... urrgg." Ana gasped for a huge breath of air, then attached his breather to his face. "Comm check."

"Five by five," Lee said over the common channel.

"Grraugh," Ana said.

"Centurion, are you okay?" Lee asked.

"Too much sulfur." Ana gasped. "Breather will clear it." He donned a heavy pair of gloves and climbed up to the outer ladder to the top of the ship, then positioned himself right at the hatch. Pulling on his sensor binoculars, he did a quick three-sixty sweep of the horizon, then methodically scanned each quadrant.

"No visible threats," Ana yelled. "I'm recording thermal signatures for later analysis."

Rocky walked to the end of the ramp but not onto the ground, then cocked a leg and peed over the side. His pee steamed in the cold. He walked back up into the ship, accepting a back scratch from Kay as she walked down the ramp.

Dena retreated to the port air lock and opened the panel that gave access to the fuel couplings. Then she opened the locker in the air lock and fed the water hose down to Scruggs. Scruggs coiled it on the ground as Dena lowered it. When the hose was played out, Dena stepped onto the ledge outside the lock and snapped the shipside of the hose to the inlet valve. Scruggs commenced dragging the other end of the hose to the cliff over the lake.

Dena disappeared inside the lock, then reappeared on the ramp and moved to help Scruggs drag the hose. Once clear of the melt caused by landing, their feet left steaming footprints in the yellow snow that covered most of the walk to the edge. At the top of the cliff, they lowered the hose down fifteen feet until its intake was submerged in the lake.

"Isn't there a hose set up in one of the landing legs?" Dena said.

"Yes," Scruggs said, fiddling with a clamp and a stake to keep the hose from dropping into the lake. "But it was damaged. Another thing the engineer needs to fix."

Gavin came up on the radio. "Ready on pumps, ladies."

"Need a few," Scruggs said. "This rock feels strange."

"Strange how?"

Scruggs flexed her feet. "Springy or bouncy. Weird. Um, is this water in this lake, or..."

"Dilute sulfuric acid," Lee said over the radio. "Very dilute, according to the records. Hose should be fine."

Gavin, Dena, and Scruggs talked for the next ten minutes till the pump was sucking water into the ship.

"On track, Skipper," Gavin said. "Full shift at least to load up. More like a shift and a half."

Dirk walked down the ramp to stand next to Kay. "Budget for two. Anything that can be fixed better here with gravity?"

"We've got gravity, Skipper, but everything is going to stink till I purge the atmosphere later or freeze all the smell out when we're in the dark. And sulfuric acid isn't kind to equipment."

"No repairs, then," Dirk said. "Centurion?"

"All clear, Navy. Horizon to horizon. Thermal signatures consistent with rocks, some hills visible that could hide people or vehicles, but I'll have a good shot at them if they approach. I looked at the camera feed coming in—the river looked to be in rocky gullies all the way down to the lake, which matches what I see here, and the bluff over there insulates us from rapid-water rise. Only weather is scattered

clouds. Cold temperature but nothing that standard gear can't handle."

"You good up there?"

"Scruggs and I will hand off every half shift. We can both get some sleep that way."

"Navigator? What do you see?"

"No change in the beacons," Lee said over the radio. "They're broadcasting the same patterns that they were when we slipped past. Nothing on the commercial radio channels. I looked at the cameras from the landing, and the weather is mostly clear on this horizon. No surprises there."

Dirk shivered. "It's cold."

"It gets colder before it gets warmer. Second primary, the big one, doesn't rise for two hours. It will warm up then."

"You going to be able to get some sleep?"

"Dena said she would spell me in later. She can watch the board for alarms."

"Outstanding," Dirk said. He turned to Kay. "You're on your own for a few hours."

Kay pointed to the dorsal surface of the ship. "You always have an armed guard on empty planets?"

"Yes," Dirk said.

"And what's he protecting you against?"

"Thunderstorms," Scruggs said, passing by. "Also, clouds, snow, and avalanches."

"I see," Kay said. "Killer weather. Gets you every time. Then, what's the sensor watch for? Green-eyed monsters?"

"Mostly wolves," Gavin said, coming down the ramp. "We're all scared of wolves."

"Wolves? You have a lot of experience with wolves," Kay asked.

"Too much." Gavin shivered and walked back up the ramp. "Too cold for me. I'm going down for a shift, Skipper."

"What do you do about the wolves?" Kay asked.

"We embrace them, feed them, and learn their wolfish ways," Dena said, following Gavin. "Then bring them on as extra crewmembers. I'm for my bunk. Lee, buzz me fifteen before you want a break."

"Will do," Lee said. "Pilot, you need a shift of sleep, too."

"A walk first," Dirk said, "A long walk. Then a meal and then sleep. I'll be ready for liftoff."

"Don't go too far," Lee said.

"Centurion can keep an eye on me," Dirk said. He stepped off the ramp and flexed his feet on the ground. "Right, Centurion?"

"Will do, Navy," Ana said. "I'll keep you centered in my rifle scope and think dark thoughts. How about that?"

“Do you have any other kinds of thoughts, Centurion?” Dirk said.

“Never saw the need.”

“Miss Kay,” Dirk said, “care to accompany me?”

Kay stepped off the ramp and flexed her feet. “Scruggs was right. The ground feels strange. It flexes.”

“In my experience, planets often feel strange when you first walk on them after being on a ship. You’ll get used to it.”

Kay laughed and mimicked Dirk’s voice. “Oh, poor little schoolgirl, just listen to your experienced Uncle Dirk. He’ll show you things. ‘Planet’s often feel strange when you first walk on them’—You can’t help yourself, can you?”

She laughed again and marched to the lake. Dirk had to trot to catch up. Heart’s Desire had landed on a rocky plain next to the lake. There was plenty of room for a spaceship, provided you stayed away from the pointy yellow-green rocks.

The river flowed from hills in the far distance. The source mountains barely glimpsed on the edge of the sensors as they landed. The river had carved a deep channel down to this inland lake. Lee had chosen a landing point back from the water but near a cliff. The cliff was at least fifteen feet tall and dropped straight to the lake. Enough vertical distance that the Heart’s Desire was insulated from a change in the river’s volume or tidal effects. If the water level rose, they’d have plenty of warning.

The cliff was too steep to climb down, but Dirk and Kay had stepped four feet from the rocky plain down to a benchland. The river had originally been wider and shallower, until the churning waters had channelized the center of the old valley deeper than the rest, forming a deeper canyon in a shallower valley. They marched along the old river bottom, only their heads visible from the ship, until they found a broken section that allowed them to climb down to the river estuary. The river flowed out of the canyon and into the lake, but the sediment had created a wide sweeping beach that led steeply from the rock walls to the water. They only had to stumble down a few feet until they could climb to the sand. The sand stretched off to their left, gradually narrowing until it ended at the vertical rock face. They wandered in that direction until the beach was gone.

Kay held up three fingers, and Dirk switched to private channel three.

“Something you want to say?” Dirk said.

“Who are you people, really?” Kay asked.

“What are you talking about?”

“I’ve seen commando units that aren’t as efficient as your crew. Sentries, watch schedules, repairs, refueling, all done within minutes of landing. Total cooperation, no arguments. Reasonable assignment

of duties. Everyone takes their responsibilities seriously and looks out for the others. You're organized, coordinated, and you assign according to skill and ability. Who are you, really?"

"We're just people. People who have, who all have, some reason to get away from something. Or someone. Whatever the reason, we're happy getting away. We need to work together to stay alive, and, well, stay free."

"So, it's just enlightened self-interest? You're all pure mercenaries?"

"I wouldn't use the word pure for any of us. Except perhaps Scruggs. She's still got a lot of illusions. Losing those will be painful to her."

"You might end up tangling with an Imperial ship when you get to New Oregon. You're an Imperial officer."

"Was," Dirk said.

"Still are, I think. You up to firing on an Imperial ship? Or resisting a boarding? Getting some poor, dumb Imperial trooper killed?"

"Imperial troopers go through an extensive vetting process," Dirk said. "They're not stupid. But no, I'm not looking forward to tangling with them. But I can if I have to."

"Guess Scruggs isn't the only one with illusions," Kay said. She stooped and picked a round yellow rock from the beach and skipped it across the lake. "Two bounces. I can do better." She picked up another. "I was ready to shoot Cheong myself when you folks arrived. Here's my precious cargo of weapons, weapons we desperately need, hijacked and carried by a bunch of clowns. Kids, washed-up military, total wastes of oxygen. What a complete disaster, I thought it was."

This time, her rock skipped three times. "Better." She stooped and picked another rock and gave it to Dirk. "You try."

"This one's the wrong shape," Dirk said. He bent down and selected another, then skipped it six bounces. "You said it was a complete disaster before. What about now?"

"Now, I'm only two jumps away from home. I have a shipload of weapons, a reasonable plan to reinforce my friends, and an astonishingly competent group ready to help. I'm glad you're on my side."

"We're not on your side."

"Whose side are you on?"

"Our own side."

"You just told me that doesn't exist."

"Fine, we do it for money," Dirk said. "Just for the money."

Kay picked up another rock and skipped it seven times. "As you say."

***

“Of course he wants to sleep with her,” Dena said over the radio. “He has from the first time he saw her. I don’t know why he’s waiting.”

It was a shift change. The other sun was finally peeping over the horizon. Ana and Scruggs were outside, and Ana had been pointing out landmarks to Scruggs, making sure she understood all the functions of the sensor goggles Cheong had provided. Dena sat next to Lee at the board, running through the current hierarchy of warnings that could appear. They were all tied on the radio net, all bored, and all gossiping.

“But Pilot isn’t like that,” Scruggs said, “He’s, he’s…”

“He’s a man,” Dena said. “They’re all like that. Dirk, Gavin, the centurion, all of them.”

“They are not. Centurion isn’t like that.”

“Private,” Ana said, “sorry to disabuse you, but I’ve got children and grandchildren, and that didn’t happen by immaculate conception. I’m old, not dead.”

“But you don’t look at all women like that?” Scruggs sucked in her breath. “You don’t think of me like that?”

“Private,” Ana said, “you’re an attractive, fit young woman and a good soldier to boot. If I’d met you twenty or thirty years ago, I’d have been following you with my tongue out.” He coughed. “Actually, more like forty or fifty years ago, but the principle remains the same.”

“That’s very… strange,” Scruggs said. “With your age and all.”

“Get back to me about that in, say, thirty years,” Ana said. “Tell me if your opinion changes. In the meantime, they’ve dropped down over the bluff. I could see a head occasionally but not anymore. If they’re talking, they’re on a private channel, probably so Dirk’s seduction can take place in privacy.”

“Won’t work,” Dena said.

“Why not?” Scruggs said.

“Wrong target. Kay already has her own picked out.”

“Gavin?” Scruggs said.

“’Course not. He’s just a kid to her. No, Kay has her sights set on somebody else.”

“Who?” Scruggs asked.

“We can hear your wide-eyed innocence through the radio, Baby Marine. You need to work on that.”

“I’m just curious. Who?”

“Our venerable centurion here. She’s been after him since she got here.”

“But… but…” Scruggs spluttered. “The centurion?”

“Private,” Ana said, “we already said I’m not dead, so it’s at least a possibility, but I’m curious as to why Nature Girl thinks that. Miss Kay

has barely interacted with me."

"I know," Dena said. "She's clever. Making you think that she's not interested. Nothing for you to object to. But she's been watching you, challenging you."

"She has not challenged me."

"Who taught Scruggs how to better strip her gun? Who showed the engineer up? And right now, she's putting good old Dirk the Loverboy in his place. She's systematically emasculating all the other men, except you. She's showing you how tough and competent she is. That's all you respect—competence."

"I'm interested in effort as well," Ana said.

"Not as much."

"Well, as exciting as my love life is for you girls to moon over, I need to change the subject to a more important one," Ana said. "Since you all agree I'm old, I'm going to give you all some old-man's advice on our upcoming civil war."

"Miss Kay said it was a revolution," Scruggs said.

"And that's part of the problem," Ana said. "Revolutions sound great. Heroic oppressed peasants. Vicious landlords. Revolutionaries are clean and passionate. They give stirring speeches, proclaim great liberties, have hot girlfriends. Everybody likes a good revolution. This isn't a revolution. This is a civil war. Rather than noble fighters protecting truth and justice, you have fat, angry people shooting their neighbors kids because, ten years ago, the neighbor's dog shat on their lawn. Or they want a promotion at the water department where they work, so they claim their boss is a sympathizer, and after the secret police haul them away to a reeducation camp, they can get her job. Very nasty, very dirty, very brutal. Remember that."

"Always can count on you cheering us up," Dena said.

"We're mercenaries," Ana said. "We do this for money. That's what we're good at."

"Except we're not," Lee said. "We're not good at it. And we're not in this for the money."

Everyone was silent.

"Lee, what are you talking about? Of course we're in it for the money. I mean, aren't we?" Scruggs said.

"Sister Scruggs," Lee said. "How much money do you have in your cabin? Left after all our events."

"Well, not much. I needed a new gun-cleaning kit, and..."

"Precisely. The centurion is a professional soldier. He could get employment with a real mercenary unit at real wages. But he doesn't. You never ask how much we'll earn on a job. Of all of us, you pay the least attention. Money doesn't interest you for some reason."

"Money interests me," Dena said. "Very much."

“You could have been rich, back on your home world,” Lee said. “You were a member of the biggest trading company on your planet. A privileged member. A sister of the ruling house.”

“I hated my sister.”

“You could have put up with it. You were destined to become the leader eventually.”

“Until I botched my very own revolution.”

“Which you had no need to undertake,” Lee said. “Just by staying alive and aiding your family you would have been wealthy. By your world’s standards, extremely wealthy. You had no need to stir things up. Why bother?”

“Maybe I didn’t like taking directions from stupid people,” Dena said. “And what about you—Navigator, Medic, and sometimes Pilot? How come you aren’t working for Bigco Imperial shipping lines or guarding the Emperor’s favorite lizard, something like that. Why are you here? Money isn’t the reason for you. What is it?”

“It’s not money for me,” Lee said. “Not for anybody here. If we’re mercenaries, we’re incompetent ones.”

“How so?” Scruggs asked.

“Mercenaries get paid.”

“We get paid,” Scruggs said.

“Not enough,” Ana said, “And not often. What’s that.”

“What’s what?” Lee asked.

“Something… it’s starting to rain. Where’s that coming from?”

“Sun’s rising. It’s warming up. Clouds are forming,” Lee said.

“More like a mist rising… what’s the temperature out there?” Ana said.

“Not much. Ten Celsius.”

“Uh oh. Somebody look up the melting temp of sulfur.”

Chapter Eighteen

Dirk flipped another rock into the lake. “We don’t have to explain ourselves to you. We just have to deliver your guns. Six, seven—no, eight splashes this time.”

“You don’t—that’s nine. Ten. How did you do the delayed splash?”

Kay and Dirk looked at the lake’s surface. Waves washed the shore, but the surface was smooth except for the ripples expanding from the skipped rocks. Another ripple formed farther out, then one close to shore, then others pockmarked the surface, rippling away from them.

“Rain, it’s raining,” Dirk said. “Out there on the water.”

“Where’s it coming from?” Kay looked up. The empty sky stretched dark blue above them. “Where are the clouds?”

“It’s blowing in,” Dirk said. “Over the top. Must be originating elsewhere.”

“Aren’t you supposed to tell me how romantic it is to be caught together in a rainstorm? That it’s a sign that we’re meant to be together through thick and thin?”

“You’re cynical,” Dirk said. “I’ve never said that to a woman.”

“And you’re predictable. Did you just kiss them?”

“Did somebody hurt you badly?” Dirk asked.

“Nope. I’m the one that does the hurting. To them.”

“Ow,” Dirk said, grabbing his wrist.

“Exactly. Ow.”

“I meant that rain is coming down hard. It hurts.”

“Stop being such a wimp. Big tough guy like you—can’t stand the rain.”

The wind increased, and the surface of the lake roiled with the downpour.

“It’s coming down hard,” Dirk said. “Let’s get back.”

“Yes, we—ow. It does hurt.” Kay held up her hand. “Hit me pretty hard. My hand hurts.”

Dirk jerked as the rain pattered on him. “It does but not so much hurt as...”

“Burns,” Kay said.

“Burns, like acid,” Dirk said. He turned to face upriver, where the sun was peeking over the hills.

As the rising second sun warmed the ground. Sulfuric snow sublimed to a rising mist. The mist rose ten or twenty feet, but the planetary temperature gradients pushed it into an offshore wind. A

yellow-green wall of sulfuric clouds built on the horizon, pushing steadily across the rocky plain to them.

"Burns like sulfuric acid," Kay said. "It is sulfuric acid. The cliff. Take cover."

She and Dirk ran back to the edge of the river channel.

The meandering river had undermined the rock, and by pressing their backs hard against the rock face, the acid rain flew in front and splattered on the rocks.

"Better get out of here," Dirk said. He punched his comm. "Heart's Desire, Heart's Desire?"

There was only silence.

***

"But where are they?" Lee said. "I can't get them on the radio."

"They're behind that bank over there," Ana said. "At least they were when I was tracking them. I can't see their heads now. They're probably lying down."

"Why would they be lying down?" Scruggs said.

The silence stretched.

"Well, Baby Marine," Dena said, "when a man and a woman love each other very much and they want to become mommies and daddies __"

"Shut up," Scruggs said. "Or I'll beat your Imperial ass."

Dena laughed.

"Do we send somebody after them?" Lee asked.

"Do you have a hostile environment suit stashed somewhere?" Ana asked. "'Cause if you don't, you won't like it out there."

"Will the sulfur kill them?" Dena asked. "The sulfuric acid, I mean. It's not very strong, is it?"

"Not if it's rain," Ana said. "Water rain that is. Water dilutes it."

"It can't be too strong, or it would have started eating at the pipes."

"The pipes," Gavin said. "Gotta get those in. The acid will get at them."

"I thought they were metal," Dena said.

"They are. Sulfuric acid eats metal. Not right away, like on a vid, but it will score them over time. Ruin the connectors. Given enough time, it could dissolve them."

"How much time?"

"Depends on the concentration," Gavin said. "Scruggs, I'll shut down the pump. But somebody needs to get out there and pull things in. Can you do it?"

"In the sulfuric acid rain?" Ana said. "I'll do it. I have armor inserts in my suit."

"Gonna eat at them, the rain will," Gavin said. "You won't like it

afterward."

"Wait," Dena said. "Metal won't dissolve in a few seconds or a few minutes, will it?"

"No," Gavin said. "Minutes or hours at least. There's some issues with heat if you're in an enclosed area, but heat isn't a problem out there. Why?"

"All this talk of eating has given me an idea," Dena said.

"What about the pilot?" Lee said.

"Warm up the systems," Gavin said. "We need to get the hoses back in first. Otherwise, we're all going to get eaten."

"Unless we give it something else to eat," Dena said.

***

"What's your line now, Loverboy?" Kay asked, pushing herself back into the rock. "That storm is getting heavier. My feet got spattered. Little brown spots on my boots. They're getting bigger. That's not good."

"How about my line is 'I wish I was somewhere else?'" Dirk said.

"Somewhere else sounds good. Ideas how to get there?"

"Not at the moment, no."

"Pilots," Kay said. "Need to do everything for them. Can the ship get us?"

"Not down here. Beach isn't wide enough to land on."

"They can land in the water."

"I'm not sure dipping the ship in a vat of acid is a good idea, no matter how diluted it is."

"The magic lake's going to eat your ship? Really? That's your reason."

"It won't eat it. It might just weaken a few joints or fuel line couplings or something like that, which blow out when we're going through atmosphere and cause us to crash or explode. I'm not in favor of explosions."

"We could run back."

"We could. It doesn't seem like it's that dangerous yet, the rain. It's not dissolving the rocks out there."

"Except we're not made of rock. We're made of skin, and it's going to hurt an Imperial-damned lot while it melts our skin. Or eyes. Or lungs."

"It won't melt our skin," Dirk said. "The storm isn't strong enough."

The sky darkened as a blue-yellow cloud roared overhead. The rain doubled, bouncing from the rocks, which started to steam with an occasional bubble. The temperature rose, and yellow-green mist clouded their vision.

"And now?" Kay said. "How about now?"

***

"Hold it higher," Ana said. "Lean it into the wind. Keep it level."

"Trying, Centurion," Scruggs said.

"Bite me, old man," Dena said.

Ana had on a full skinsuit with gloves and boots and had his combat armor inserts on. He was leaning out of the port air lock, fiddling with the refueling controls, cranking the water hose back in.

Gavin had hammered together a shield of the only metal they had in quantity that was easy to fix—food trays. He'd made an L-shaped shield by screwing trays into each other and attached two long handles made out of mops. The women held the resulting cover over and upwind of the three while Ana cranked.

"Always hated red, green, and blue, anyway. Ouch. Imperial hair follicles. Keep that level, ladies."

"Too much wind. Trays are breaking apart, Centurion," Scruggs said.

The whole apparatus flexed in her hands, the trays cracking at their seams.

"Keep it up. I need another minute. The hose is coming in."

A gust pulled on Dena's side of the handles and lifted the tray, slamming Dena into the air lock. "Emperor's anus. Hurry up, old man."

"Another minute. Hang on."

"You said that a minute ago already," Dena said.

A crack appeared between two trays.

"Centurion," Scruggs said, "it's breaking up."

"Thirty seconds," Ana said, cranking for all he was worth. "Give me thirty seconds."

Dena slammed into the air lock side again. "Emperor's hairy anus. I'm going to buy you a clock and teach you how to tell time when this is over."

The bottom of the hose clanked against the hull as it reeled in. "Almost there. Just have to tie it down and close the panel."

The clanking hose disappeared into its roller, and Ana pulled the closing lever. The lever didn't move.

"Lever's stuck." Ana pulled, but it didn't move. "Really stuck."

"Let it out some, then yank," Scruggs yelled. "The winch pawls get in the way."

Ana yanked the hose, but it was frozen. "Hose isn't moving."

Dena slammed sideways again, and this time, so did Scruggs.

The shield split in the middle, then pieces flew off in all directions. Dena ducked as a piece flipped over her head and banged into the lock. Ana cursed and batted away the remains as it struck his chest, splintering into pieces as it hit his ceramic inset. Scruggs ducked back

inside, holding a mop handle. All three danced as the wind whipped acid laden water at them, cursing as tiny drops burned hands and legs.

"Status?" Gavin said on the intercom. "I've still got red lights back here."

Ana stood and punched the Talk button. "Hose is in, but the panel won't close. Can we lift with it open?"

"Only if you don't want to refuel again, ever," Gavin said.

Ana cursed. "How much fuel—"

"Not enough. We need to get that panel closed," Gavin said. "Get it closed, get in front of this storm, and finish refueling. Soon. Before anything important melts."

"How much time do we have?" Dena said.

"Should have lifted five minutes ago."

"We can't go out. That acid burns our skin."

"Don't get it on your skin, then," Gavin said.

"Thanks for your advice, you stuck-up, moronic—" Dena waved. "Hairy Empress, that hurts. It burns." She slammed the outer door shut, then spun the inner locking door open and jumped inside.

"About what I'd expect," Ana said, watching her go. "All right, Private, I'm going out there again. You get ready on the door, pull it open, and I'll step out and play with that panel, got it?"

"You'll get burned, Centurion."

"Can't be helped. I'm the least useful in space. Except Nature Girl there. Now, tell me what I have to do to jerk that panel—"

The inner door swung open again, and Dena jumped into the lock.

"Gods of the Emperor," Scruggs said. "What happened?"

Dena's entire head was covered with a bubbling red mass, like all her blood vessels had let go at once. Her hair had turned green and red, and slime dripped down her back. Her hands were similarly covered with sludge. Where her face used to be was a mass of red and green—no eyes, no nose, no mouth. Frothy bubbles formed where her nose had been.

Rocky followed behind her, barking.

"The acid, what, how—" Scruggs said.

Dena pushed the inner lock shut, pulled the lever to release the auto-lock on the outer door, then turned and stumbled across the air lock. She couldn't see and had to feel around to find the locking wheel, but once she had her bloodred hands on it, she spun it and stepped back as the winds pushed it open. Then she stepped out onto the ledge and used the handholds to walk to the panel. A snap and a click, and the panel slammed shut. Dena stumbled back in, reddish steam rising everywhere from her face and hands.

"Waaaaa—waaaattt—" Dena said, tripping over the door and falling into the air lock.

Ana pulled her inside, then shut the lock behind her. “Water. She wants water. Help me get her to a shower.”

Gavin’s voice boomed over the intercom. “We’re green. Panel’s closed, locks closed. Can we go?”

Ana hammered the button. “Everyone on board. Go. Go. Go.” He and Scruggs hauled a steaming, burbling Dena to the shower.

***

“I’m just saying that I’ve been in worse. More dangerous situations, that is,” Dirk said, pushing himself into the rock and shielding his face under his arm.

“Stop trying to impress me, Loverboy,” Kay said. “Save your energy for figuring out a way of getting us out of here. And what exactly is worse than waiting to dissolve slowly, in excruciating pain, as your skin melts?”

“Well, get killed in space combat.”

“Over quickly, and you’re with friends. Plus, if you do survive, you have excellent medical assistance at hand.”

“Running out of air in your suit?”

“Turn the temperature down and lower the airflow—you’ll fall asleep from the carbon monoxide in minutes and slip away.”

“Getting shot?”

“Doc gives you great drugs to forget the pain.”

“Drowning?”

“Over in two minutes.”

“I’m trying to be positive here.”

“Try harder. And inject a dose of realism here. How long to get back to the ship? Could we run it in ten minutes?”

“Maybe. Think we can do it?”

“We’d lose fingers and hands if we didn’t shield them. And probably toes, too. These boots aren’t too sturdy. Look at the holes in them. Any minute now, they’ll go through fabric to our feet. Should have worn the magboots.”

Dirk looked at his boots. There were several smoking stains, and one looked to burn through shortly.

“Wait it out?”

“We’ll be jumping hotfoot any time now.”

A shape rocketed over them. The Heart’s Desire was aloft and had found them.

“Heart’s Desire—CRACKLE—five, CRACKLE—Pilot. Respond, Pilot. Over.” Lee said, through heavy static.

“Navigator, Pilot here. Stuck under rock ledge. Acid is getting to us. Can you get close, and we’ll run aboard? Over.”

“CRACKLE. CRACKLE.”

“Not reading you, Lee. Repeat.”

“CRACKLE—in the shit.”

“I know, Lee. I know. We’re in trouble. Can you get closer?”

“CRACKLE. CRACKLE—poop. Over.”

The radio was silent. The Heart’s Desire spun out across the lake and arced back to them.

“What’s she talking about?” Kay asked. “I don’t understand.”

“She’s not making any sense to me,” Dirk said. “Sulfur or clouds must be causing problems with radio.”

“Wrong time to curse. We need help. Can she pick us up?”

“She’ll try,” Dirk said.

“Does that mean she won’t succeed? How good of a pilot is she?”

“Good enough.”

“What does that mean? Will she or won’t she.”

“She’s the navigator. I’m the pilot. She’ll try her best.”

“We’re pretty close to that cliff. What if her best isn’t good enough?”

“She’ll still try, regardless of the risks,” Dirk said. He grimaced. “If the others let her.”

***

“Up, up, up, left, slow forward,” Gavin said over the radio. “Hold it there, guys. Keep moving, Lee. Stand by for drop.”

Ana and Scruggs stood well inside the port air lock, far away from the acid rain blowing in. Gavin had rigged a flat plank that ran from the door to the sheltered side of the air lock and stabilized it.

A camera slung underneath the plank pointed straight out and parallel to it, giving an electronic view of what was below. Two huge bags filled with brown solids, steaming in the heat, sat on top. Ana and Scruggs used one hand to hold the bags steady. The other to pinch their noses. Gavin was directing them and Lee from engineering. Dirk and Kay were visible through the lock, pressed into the cliff. Lee was overflying the cliff, parallel and only feet out but high enough above that if she lost control, a sideways motion wouldn’t slam them into the rock wall.

The plan was to pass the two trapped crew members and use the angle of the ship to drop the two bags out the door, then have them impact in front of Dirk and Kay.

“Slow, Lee, slow. Five seconds,” Gavin said.

“Too windy,” Lee said.

The Heart’s Desire rocketed up on one side, and side-slipped left. Ana and Scruggs yelled over the radio as the cliff rushed at them. Lee punched the thrusters, and the ship lifted and skimmed above the cliff top, then lifted higher in a shower of sulfur yellow clouds.

“Too fast,” Ana yelled. “We didn’t get a shot.”

“And we almost hit the rocks,” Scruggs said.

“I’ll try again,” Lee said.

The ship circled the plain and roared back to the lake. This time, they didn’t get close to the beach before the wind shifted, and Lee had to power up and over the rocks.

“It’s too unpredictable,” Lee said. “I have to hold us against the wind, but when it drops, then we zoom at the cliff.”

“Do it in the other direction,” Ana said. “Come out from the land side. Stay over the cliff and only let out at the last second, then Scruggs and I will dump it.”

“Let me circle back,” Lee said. She spun the ship, brought it in over the cliff downstream from the trapped crew members. She held the ship directly over the cliff top and balanced on the thrusters.

“This is better,” she said. “I’ll give you the count this time, and when I see them in front, I’ll shear off. A starboard turn is your signal to drop. Everyone ready?”

Everyone signaled yes, and she moved the ship along the ridge, keeping it tilted against the strong winds.

Scruggs and Ana spotted along the plank and out the air lock. Yellow clouds of mist shrouded glimpses of a rocky plain below them, but they were still above the cliff.

“Four. Three. Rolling down.”

The ship banked more till it was almost standing on its side.

“Hold. Two. One.”

The cliff top appeared in a gap in the mist, and Ana and Scruggs saw a sliver of beach below, then glimpsed black-and-silver skinsuits by red rocks.

“Drop.”

Ana and Scruggs released their hands, and the two bags slid down the greased surface, dropping out of the lock and arcing toward the crew below.

***

“But what are they doing?” Kay said. “They’re going to pass us, but they’re too high. We can’t climb up to them.”

“Not sure, but they’re trying something. I can’t make out the radio calls at all.”

“Me neither.”

A gust caught the Heart’s Desire, and it spun, then recovered.

“They’re slowing down. The air lock is open. Are they going to drop a rope?”

“Not sure. I don’t think I’ll be able to get up a rope. Not with my hands like this.”

Wayward drops had burned Dirk's exposed hands. He hid them behind his back.

"This is—augh."

"What?"

"Face. Got one on the cheek. It burns. Empress's ankles, it burns. Tell me again how much worse places you've been."

"Having some problems with that," Dirk said. "She's got to watch for the gusts. If she doesn't hold them—"

The Heart's Desire suddenly disappeared over the cliff top, and the thrusters roared.

"Overcompensated," Dirk said. "They'll try again."

"Will they?"

"Of course. Listen."

The thrusters roared again, and the Heart's Desire blew out over the lake, two hundred meters away. It pivoted, lined up on them, and moved up.

The thrusters boomed again, and it roared back over the cliff, still short of them.

"What are they doing?" Kay said.

"Winds are too strong," Dirk said. "If they only—wait."

The thrusters boomed again, and they glimpsed part of the ship edging over the cliff downstream. It hovered partway over the cliff top, then crept forward, disappearing out of their view.

"She's holding it above the top, then going to overrun us."

"But what for? What are they doing? Call them on the radio."

"I don't know what they're doing, but I'll tell you one thing. With these winds, making them answer the radio while maneuvering is a very bad idea."

"Here they come again."

The Heart's Desire appeared almost directly overhead, slid over the lake, and tilted on its side.

A brown bag flew out of the air lock and arced down to them. Another followed it a second later. The two bags flew straight down, impacting the rocks two feet in front of them, breaking open and showering them with a pile of brown solids.

Dirk and Kay bent down to inspect the bags but gagged.

Kay retched, then retched again. "Tell me, Loverboy, why did your ship drop a hundred pounds of dog shit on us?"

Chapter Nineteen

"Say that again, please, Navigator," Dirk said over the radio.

"I said smear the dog poop all over your skin and your head," Lee repeated. "It will protect you against the acid rain. We'll hover here in the water, just offshore. Once you're all covered up, run out and wade out to us. The water's still diluted enough, and we'll have the ramp down, and trail a rope. We can haul the two of you in."

"You want me to cover myself in dog shit and swim through an acid lake, then climb up into the ship and sit in the lock, still covered in dog shit?" Dirk said.

"We're calling it feces, Pilot," Lee said. "Or dog poop."

"I'm calling it insane," Dirk said.

"Do you have any better ideas? Should we leave you there while we figure them out?"

Dirk opened his mouth, then shook his head. He looked at Kay, who had picked up a double handful of dog poop. She held it up in front of her, not far from Dirk's face. "If I were you, Loverboy, I'd close my mouth now. Both figuratively and literally."

Dirk shut his mouth and closed his eyes.

***

Two hours later, the Heart's Desire sat on a yellowish sandy beach next to a broad river. The second sun was high in the sky, and the temperature had climbed enough that the sulfuric snow had melted away. Gavin had rigged a second hose from the water tanks, and they were taking turns rinsing dog poop and sulfuric acid off piles of clothes.

Every one of them sported burn marks of one size or another on hands, arms, cheeks, or necks. They looked like refugees from a mosquito convention. Any skin that had been exposed had a red mark.

"We saved all the skinsuits," Lee said. "Rinsing them in the shower did the trick."

"I still don't get it," Dirk said. "Why couldn't you have given us food to smear all over us, rather than bags of dog poop? The food protected Dena as well as the poop did us."

"Not enough time," Dena said, wringing her hair dry. "I checked the trash bin contents and used that. To get more, we would have had to open up a couple dozen trays and scrape the contents out. The poop was right there, and it did the job." She squeezed her hair again.

“Plus, we got rid of all that poop, and I got two showers in the same day.”

“You had tasty tomatoes rubbed on your face,” Dirk said. “I have dog crap in my ear holes. You could have taken more time.”

“We’re already throwing away a bunch of clothes, Navy,” Ana said. “Ruined in the rain. If we waited longer, we might have had to throw you away. Say, I never really thought that out. Maybe we didn’t make the right decision.”

“I’m thankful,” Kay said. “Much appreciated. Excellent piloting, improvisations, and great teamwork. I’m proud to be a member of this crew.”

The six crew members exchanged glances.

“Well,” Gavin said, “thanks, but you’re not a member, not really. Passenger.”

“Visitor,” Dena said.

“Customer. Rich person who will give us money,” Ana said. “Don’t forget that part. The money. We’re kind of focused on that.”

“You don’t want me in your crew?”

“It’s not that,” Gavin said. “We appreciate the thought, but we’re not ready for others to join up.”

“How did you six decide to join up, then?” Kay asked. “What’s the procedure to become a member of this unit.”

“Unit?” Lee asked.

“You’re a mercenary unit, right? Working, fighting together.”

“Well, we are. Sort of,” Gavin said.

“We share expenses and revenue, like mercenaries do,” Ana said.

“Or pirates,” Dena said.

“We’re not pirates,” Lee said.

“True,” Dena said. “Pirates sometimes get paid.”

“We’re going to get paid this time,” Ana said. “No payment, no weapons, right rebel lady?”

“Of course,” Kay said. “But the weapons have to get to New Oregon.”

“They will,” Dirk said. “Gavin, what’s the fuel situation?”

“Another two shifts,” Gavin said. “We’ll be fueled and watered up, and before you ask, we won’t have this sunrise storm issue again for another five shifts, so we have plenty of time to finish up.”

“Very well,” Dirk said. “Let’s get this cleanup finished and get off planet right after we’re full.”

“About the cleanup, Navy,” Ana said. “The air lock’s still a mess.”

“Define ‘mess.’”

“The walls are splashed with dog shit mixed with sulfuric acid. We need it hosed off and, in some cases, scraped.”

“Well, surely the four of you—”

“Nope,” Gavin said. “We talked about that. Your job.”

“You’re not going to clean it?” Dirk asked.

All five shook their heads.

“You want Kay and I to do it?”

All five nodded.

“Well, if I ordered you to”—the chuckles and giggles stopped Dirk—“fine. Kay and I—”

“Only room for one person to clean in there, Skipper,” Gavin said. “It’s you or her.”

Dirk turned to Kay.

She produced a coin from a pocket. “Let’s toss for it, Loverboy. Call it in the air.” She flipped the coin up.

“Heads,” Dirk said.

Kay caught the coin in her right hand and slapped it onto her left wrist, then revealed it.

“Tough break, Captain Dirk. Can one of you show him where the mops are?”

***

The Heart’s Desire roared off the planet and into orbit. Lee had delayed them an extra few hours to mask two of the sensor platforms from their course. She and Dirk were plotting the drift to the jump point.

Gavin was napping after an entire shift of testing that nothing had succumbed to the sulfur-laden air or water. The remaining crew was playing poker in the lounge.

“Well, at least the air lock is clean now,” Scruggs said, examining her cards. “Pilot did a good job.”

“I’ve always said he has a future in the custodial service,” Ana said. “Glad to be proved correct. Bet is to you, Nature Girl.”

“I’m out,” Dena said, tossing her cards in the middle. “I got nothing.”

“Call,” Kay said.

“Call,” Scruggs said.

“Cards, then,” Ana said. “Ms. Kay?”

Kay smiled at Ana. “How many do you think I should take, Mr. Centurion?”

“Do you like to live dangerously?”

“Always.”

“Take four, then.”

“Four it is,” Kay said, sliding four over.

Scruggs frowned. “Centurion told me that was a rookie move, a move of desperation.”

“It is,” Kay said. “But I trust him. And I still want four cards.”

Scruggs fiddled with her hand. “Two—no, three. No, two.”

“Take three,” Ana said. “It’s your best bet.”

“Why three? How do you know?”

Ana smiled at her. Dena recoiled again from across the table. “I told you before, don’t do that. It’s creepy. Scruggs, take the three.”

Scruggs shrugged and held up three fingers.

“Dealer takes four,” Ana said, flicking cards onto the table. He dealt one-handed. The tossed cards formed a neat pile in front of each of the remaining players. Ana didn’t check his cards. “Bet to the dealer. Dealer bets fifty.”

“Fifty?” Kay said, watching Ana. “Bold move. Fine. I call you fifty and raise you fifty.”

“You haven’t looked at your cards,” Ana said.

“Neither have you,” Kay slid chips across. “One hundred credits to you, Scruggs.”

“Umm, that’s a lot of money.”

“You should call,” Kay said. “If I were in your position, I’d call.”

“Why?” Scruggs said.

“Just a feeling,” Kay said. “Today is your lucky day.”

Scruggs dithered. “What’s going on?”

“You need to bet, Private,” Ana said. “But if I were you, I’d call. I think it’s your lucky day, too.”

Scruggs examined her cards. “Fold.”

Ana raised an eyebrow. “You sure, Private?”

“Yes,” Scruggs said.

Ana was quiet, looking at his chips for a moment.

“Are you going to look at your cards?” Kay said.

“No, are you?”

Kay shrugged.

“Raise fifty,” Ana said. “One hundred to you.”

Kay laughed. “Well, without Scruggs in, the games no more fun. I call.”

“Show me your cards,” Ana said.

“You first,” Kay said.

Ana flipped his cards over, starting with the four in the pile. He revealed a two, three, five, and six of clubs. He looked at it, then flipped over his other card—a four of clubs.

“Straight flush, two to six,” Kay said. She flipped over her single card first. “Six of spades. Wonder what the rest of mine are?”

“I called. You have to show them,” Ana said. “Unless you want to fold.”

“I’m curious myself,” Kay said. She flipped her four pile over, one at a time. Five of spades. Four of spades. Three of spades. Her hand wavered over the last card.

“You can still fold,” Ana said.

“No need,” Kay said and flipped the last card. “Two of spades. I also have a straight flush, same as you.”

“A tie. Guess we split.” Ana scooped the pot into two equal amounts and took his half.

Kay pocketed hers.

Ana stood. “I’m going down to take a break, have a nap. We’ve got time till we clear this system. Ladies.” He got up and pulled back to his room.

“Time for a break for me as well,” Kay said. She pulled herself down and after Ana.

Dena squirmed out from the back of the table where she had been sitting. Scruggs’s cards were still in front of her.

Dena flipped them over. “Straight flush, three to seven, hearts. You would have won.”

“It was a setup,” Scruggs said.

“Of course it was,” Dena said. “Centurion cheated on the deal. And Kay knew it. So did you.” Dena narrowed her eyes. “Is that why you didn’t call?”

“I thought it was important that Centurion win something every so often.”

“Very noble of you,” Dena said. “Also, a complete lie. Why did you really fold?”

“He told me before if you’ve been playing for a half hour, and you can’t identify the pigeon at the table, then it’s you. And I learned something very important.”

“What’s that?”

“Ms. Kay can teach us how to cheat at cards,” Scruggs said.

***

The jump out of the system proved uneventful. The Nationalist comm platforms continued to ignore them—or appeared to. The beacon broadcasts didn’t change. The next jump took them closer to the Nationalist border than they would have liked, but the system was empty of traffic when they arrived.

The crew spent a half shift checking that they had left no possible electronic emissions enabled, then settled in for the short jump to New Oregon. Half a shift later, they dropped into the New Oregon system, well below the ecliptic, pulsed their engines to set up their course, then went dark and ballistic on course for a planetary landing orbit in three days.

“You’re a good navigator, Ms. Lee,” Kay said. She was sitting in the control room with Dirk, Lee, and Ana. “You have no difficulty calculating these complicated insertions. Where did you study?”

“Just a school. All Jovians go to it.”

“I hear the school is attached to the Imperial Naval Academy,” Kay said. “It’s the same one that navy officers attend. And not all Jovians go to it, only specially selected ones.”

“I was fortunate to be chosen,” Lee said.

“Indeed. Mr. Pilot, I’m told you’re a duke.”

“Who told you that?”

“Dena.”

“Why would Dena do that?” Dirk asked.

“She wanted to learn how to cheat at cards, and I wasn’t interested in teaching her. Then she offered to trade information, so I got to ask her questions. She told me all about you.”

“She did, did she? Good for her.”

“Yes. You also went to the naval academy. Commanded a shuttle detachment.”

“I did not.”

“She says you did. On detached service.”

Dirk tapped his screen. “I wasn’t a good commander. That didn’t work so well.”

“Define not well.”

“Everybody else died.”

“Not everybody. You got a whole shuttle away under fire.”

“One shuttle. Out of three.”

“Better than none.”

“Not much better. Centurion, anything to worry about here?”

“Yes, Scruggs is going to want to learn how to cheat at cards now. Which means she’s going to try it somewhere, which means there will be a fight sometime. Then we’ll all be in a bar brawl over cheating in a meaningless card came, which will cause an existential crisis as we try to determine the meaning of it all.”

“I meant sensor wise.”

“Well, nobody has hailed us, and our excellent sensor systems don’t detect anything in front of us.”

“How far in front?”

“With these sensors? Anything beyond arms-length is practically invisible.”

“Keep searching.”

“Always do… wait. I’m copying a transmission.” Ana played with his screen. “Found your Imperial guardship. ISS Moose Jaw, corvette class, calling a National freighter to stop.”

“Where is it?” Kay asked.

“Not where we wanted it to be. Not in the worse place for us but close.”

“How big a National freighter?”

“Big. Five times our size, could be.”

“Arms shipment,” Kay said. “They’re heading for the spaceport. Or close orbit. They’ll have an inventory of farm equipment or some such. At night, or whenever that corvette is busy, they’ll offload ten or twenty containers of ammunition. Goes right to the rebels.”

“I thought you were the rebels?”

“We’re the legitimate government of New Oregon.”

“I was looking at the news broadcasts. That’s not what the vids say.”

“Screw the vids.”

“No problem with that, as long as we get paid,” Ana said.

“About that Imperial warship,” Dirk said.

“They’re still talking to the National freighter about inspections. They’re arguing about some part of the accords, something to do with inspections.”

“The Nats won’t let them inspect,” Kay said. “They’ll fight if they do. The Imperial will back down. Imperial officers, they’re too cowardly to start a fight.”

“You know this Imperial officer, do you?” Dirk asked.

“I know Imperial officers. They always back down.”

“You don’t know all—”

Ana chimed in. “And they’re clearing him in now.”

Kay raised her eyebrows. “You were saying, Loverboy?”

“Nothing,” Dirk said. “Centurion, can they see us?”

“If they point their radar our way, of course.”

“Can they see that we’re a ship and not an asteroid?”

“If they put a telescope on us, any idiot can see we’re a ship. If they put an infrared detector on us, we’re hotter than anything else out here, so we’re worth looking at. If they pulse us with directional radar or lidar, all these sharp angles scream ‘artificial,’ so they’ll map us out. If they show the slightest bit of interest in us, point any sensor at us, we’re going to an Imperial prison.”

“I don’t want to be in an Imperial prison,” Kay said.

“They’re not so bad,” Dirk said. “The food is pretty good, and some of them have Tai Chi classes.”

“Better than National prisons. Or prisons on independent planets,” Ana said.

“You two know a lot about prisons,” Kay said.

“We have many skills. Centurion, how will we know if they are interested in us.”

“First thing will be a broad radar sweep,” Ana said. “Followed by more focused probes.”

“And given our... advanced set of sensors, how will we know?” Dirk asked.

The radar detector Cheong had given them was mounted on the wall of the control room and jammed in above the low atmo pressure alarm. It wailed a huge bong. A bar of red lights blasting across the face of it replaced the slow-blinking red lights.

The bong continued, and Kay and Dirk held their ears. Ana grimaced at the sensor, then twisted a dial. Nothing happened, so he tapped it with his fingers. It rumbled at them. He hit it with his fist. The sound stopped, but the lights kept flashing.

“Oh,” Ana said, “I think we’ll know.”

Chapter Twenty

"Why do we need to put it on the shipyard list? Can't we fix it on station?" Subprefect Markus asked.

He was sitting in the captain's station on the bridge of the Moose Jaw, approving paperwork.

His lead engineering rating had provided a list of required repairs to be submitted for their next overhaul.

"There are issues with the parts, sir," the rating said.

His nametag read *Spearen*.

"It's a radar detector. A civilian-class radar detector. Surely, we have spares."

"We have spares, yes, sir."

"Why not use those, then?" Markus asked.

The rating closed his mouth and flicked his eyes around the crowded bridge. The stations were packed next to each other, and the rest of the bridge crew could hear everything.

Markus got up. "Helm has the ship."

"Helm has the ship, Aye," the helmsman said.

"My cabin," Markus said.

They were loafing along with minimal thrust, so he hopped out the bridge hatch in one jump and floated down to the first hab deck, where his combined cabin office was. He palmed his door open, dropped inside, then landed on his acceleration chair.

Spearen followed and closed the door.

"What didn't you want the bridge crew to know?" Markus said.

"I have the parts, sir. But I don't know how to fix it."

"Why not? You're rated as an engineer."

"I'm a jump drive software engineer, sir, not an electrician. You want the jump drive fixed. I can do that. I've never swapped electronic components in my life."

"Why did you join the Imperial navy as an engineer, then?" Markus asked.

"I didn't join the Imperial navy, sir." Spearen held up his arm. Unlike the straight sleeve rings encircling Markus's wrists, his were wavy. "I joined the Imperial navy civilian volunteer naval reserve. Totally different thing."

"You're saying the wavy navy can't do as good a job as the regular Imperial navy?"

"I'm saying, sir, that I'm a specialist, and if you put me on a

battleship or a fleet repair tug, I'd run rings around any Imperial engineering officers trying to fix jump drive software, or calculate coordinated fleet jumps, or jumps to non-surveyed systems. But ask me to take a wrench and fix a docking chain—or in this case, fix a sensor system—I've never done that."

"Why'd you volunteer—of course you didn't. How did they get you?"

Spearen shook his head. "Yanked out of my teaching job at the software school and assigned to you as you went by."

Markus rubbed his chin. "How are things with the men?"

"They're good enough for now, but they want a real Imperial officer running things, not some 'jumped-up civilian keyboard jockey,' as they call me."

"I'll speak to them."

"I don't know much about being an officer," Spearen said. "But I do know that you speaking to them is the worst thing that can happen. I'll try to fix this if you want, but it won't end well if I fail. They're already unhappy enough as it is. I'm willing to try, though."

"Is this why our refit list is so long? Anything you're not sure of, you push on there rather than try to fix it ourselves?"

"Yes."

"Can you assign this to one of your men?"

"They don't know how, and who can blame them?"

"How are they doing with the courses?"

"Good enough, sir. I've requested the ones for the men and for myself. But we need time off regular duties."

"And I keep turning them down, of course," Markus said. "Can't spare anyone." He rubbed his chin again. "Put it on the shipyard list, then. How many of our shipyard faults should we be able to fix ourselves?"

"All of them, probably, sir."

"This won't look good on your promotion report," Markus said.

"I signed up as hostilities-only volunteer. I'm doing my best."

"Hostilities-only? What hostility?"

"The Senate, at the request of the Emperor, declared this a hostility zone so they could conscript the needed crew, or so I was told. The Emperor didn't ask for my advice."

"Don't disparage the Emperor!"

"Of course not, sir."

Markus tapped his comm. "Can we get it fixed on New Oregon? At the civilian shipyard?"

"Probably. But they're slow. It will take weeks. They'll want to bid and then fit it in their schedule, and we'll have to pay up front, which means they have no incentive to get it right."

“We won’t be back to an Imperial base for two months. We’ll have to make do.”

The intercom bonged.

“Captain, Sensors here. We have a contact. Could you come up, please?”

Spearen backed out to the corridor, Markus following.

“Do the best you can,” Markus said and pulled up to the bridge. “Captain has the ship.”

“Captain has the ship,” the helmsman said.

Markus slid behind the sensor station and ducked to avoid hitting the air vents above. “What have you got?”

The sensor operator pointed at his screen. A freighter had appeared at the jump limit.

“Ship running the blockade,” he said.

“Order him to cut accel and stand by to be searched.”

“Already did, sir. It’s a Nationalist freighter. They apologize but say they can’t stop. They’ve declared an emergency on their life support systems, say that they need urgent repairs on-planet as soon as possible. They’ve sent over a cargo manifest and said they don’t need to be inspected, filing the manifest is sufficient under the accords.”

“Chase him down, then. What he says is true, but if we can come alongside, they can’t object to an inspection that ‘doesn’t impede their ability to seek repairs’. That’s in the accords, too.”

The sensor operator looked at him.

“We can’t catch him, can we?” Markus said.

“No, sir. Not in this corvette. We’re too slow.”

Markus balanced both hands on the air vent and patted the ship. “I love you, old girl, but right now, I wish you were a destroyer, or even a frigate.”

“I’ve never been on a frigate, sir,” the sensor operator said.

“Young people today don’t understand the navy.” Markus grimaced. “Twice as long, four times the mass, better quarters, but most important, twice the acceleration. They’re real warships. With a destroyer, anything you can catch, you can beat, and anything you can’t beat can’t catch you. With us, we can chase down slow civilian ships. That’s about it.”

“Pretty slow warship.”

“We’re not a warship. We’re convoy protection, and antimissile boats. We’ve got the best antimissile boat systems there is. We can catch them before they come in range, and our offensive missiles will make short work of them. But we’re no match for other warships, nor even civilian auxiliaries. That one there, even if we caught him, he out-masses us by ten times. If he has any sort of weapons, he’d be able to take us on.” Markus pushed himself backward from the air vent and

pivoted, hitting the far wall feetfirst. “Thank him for the information, log it, and continue patrol. I’m going to get some coffee.”

“Sir.” The sensor operator coughed. “Sir, about the logs, the deadline for forwarding them to fleet HQ has passed, and we need your authorization before we can send the report. And our backup radar is still down, so we have to file for that...”

“I’m going to have a coffee and authorize reports and log forwarding, is what I meant to say,” Markus said. “How long till fleet HQ chases us down?”

“They’ve already sent a routine query, sir. We acknowledged them, but...”

“I understand. I’ll review them. Let me know if anything interesting comes up.”

The sensor screen bonged.

“Contact,” the sensor operator said. “Ship crossing the jump limit. Freighter. Beacon is off.” He fiddled with his screens, then looked over his shoulder. “Something interesting, sir. And in range for intercept this time.”

Chapter Twenty-One

"No beacon," the sensor operator reported. "But Target-3 is a freighter by the size. Nothing special, though, regular tramp freighter. Looks Imperial-made."

"You sure?"

"No, but it looks the same as a hundred I've seen everywhere in the Empire."

"No beacon means smuggler," Markus said. "Run him through the database."

"Got it," the sensor operator said, reaching for his controls. "I'll ping Target-3 with the radar and map him out. Should have an identification in a few seconds."

"Wait," Markus said.

The sensor operator stopped. "Captain?"

"Nothing active. Passive sensors only. Get me some pictures but nothing that will let him know we've seen him."

"Sir," the sensor operator said, "we found him with a radar sweep. Just a standard, wide-range sweep, but we hit him. The computer's auto-scan swept that sector by itself. Once we got the radar returned, it locked the telescopes on and took pictures. The pictures came to my station automatically. He's already been scanned."

"But just the once?" Markus asked.

"Yes, sir."

"No further active scans, then. But get me those pictures." Markus sat back at his desk and paged through his screens. "Wait. Why did the computer do an active radar scan out there to start with? What was the reason?"

"Checking," the sensor operator said. "'Albedo,' the log says."

"Albedo? As in, too bright?"

"Too bright for a rock." The sensor operator paged through his screens. "Says it shows as metal. Polished metal."

"That can't be right."

"Better pictures coming up now, sir," the sensor operator said.

Markus examined his screen. "Definitely a freighter. And I agree, it looks like an Imperial one to me. It's very shiny. Can we get dimensions?"

"If that's a standard air lock hatch on the top, which it probably is..." The sensor operator tapped more and dimensions appeared on the pictures. "Here we go."

“Sir,” the helmsman said, “five-minute warning for standard burn to maintain patrol orbit, sir. May I inform the crew?”

“Stand by,” Markus said. He checked the length of the target ship and typed them into his database. Another picture appeared on his screen. He flipped between them.

“Captain, this is the brightest ship reflection I’ve ever seen,” the sensor operator said. “Even right out of the factory, most freighters aren’t that clean.”

“Helm,” Markus said. “That course correction will it bring us closer to Target-3 or farther away.”

“Do we have an orbit for Target-3?” the helmsman asked.

“A guess,” the sensor operator said. The two bridge crewman talked. Markus kept flipping his screen between the two pictures.

“Belay the course change. When’s the next one scheduled?”

“Just after mid shift.”

“No more course changes till then. No active scans. Secure the auto-scan program. No more active targeting of any sort. Follow that ship with cameras, infrared, anything you want as long as it’s passive.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Send all the sensor sweeps to my desk and remove them from the main data bank. And log it as an asteroid.”

“Sir?”

“Put it in the log as an uncharted asteroid for now. Nothing else. Everything else is sent to me and then erased.”

“Yes, sir.”

“I’m going to my quarters. When’s the next message courier due here?”

“Three days.”

“Wonderful,” Markus said. “Helm has the bridge.”

“Helm has the bridge,” the helmsman agreed. After Markus left, he stared at the sensor operator, who shrugged.

“What do you think?” the helmsman asked.

“Captain has control of the manual logs. Not breaking any rules there.”

“He’s turning off the auto-scan.”

“But not the auto-logging. So, we’re not breaking any regs. Strange-looking ship, though. I’ve never seen one this bright. It reflects like a mirror.”

“What would cause that?”

“No idea. Never seen one like it.” The sensor operator shrugged again. “It’s like it’s been polished in an acid bath or something.”

***

“Why aren’t they moving to intercept?” Dirk asked.

“They’re closing,” Lee said. “They could be a lot closer if they didn’t keep the same course. But I don’t see a vector change.”

“We know they saw us. The radar detector sounded.”

“Did it ever,” Lee said. “Does it have to be that loud, Centurion?”

“Afraid of loud noises?” Ana asked.

“It startles you.”

“It’s supposed to startle you.”

“What if we were doing some sort of precision maneuver?”

“First, we’re in an old freighter. We can’t do precision maneuvers. Second, Navy here is the pilot, and his hands shake too much for that. And third, we’re still in deep space, so exactly what precision maneuvers will we be doing?”

“What if they shoot at us?”

“They’re nearly on the other side of the system,” Ana said. “They can’t shoot at us.”

“We’re on a ballistic course,” Lee said. “They can predict our location.”

“So, pulse the thrusters for a second, any thruster. That will generate enough of a vector change to take us clear of them. With the light speed lag, that will work.”

“Could this just be a random pulse?” Kay asked. “Are you sure it was them that tagged us? If they are not reacting, then could it have been a reflection, or maybe it bounced off something else in the system?”

“What’s the light speed delay to them?” Ana asked.

Lee fiddled with her screen. “Seven minutes.”

“So, any radar return will be fourteen minutes old when they get it,” Ana said. “We’re closing on the planet. They’re closing on the planet, so it’s not exact, but if we wait fourteen minutes and no change in their course, then they haven’t seen us, or at least haven’t decided to react to us. Wait and see if they react. And even if they launch some sort of ballistic weapons—a mass driver or something, that’s going to be going on our predicted course, and it ain’t coming at us at light speed—more like one percent of it at best.”

“Lee, can you give us a better calculation? How long the delay will be as we approach?”

“Give me a minute, Pilot.”

“Never mind that. Keep running dark,” Ana said. “Either they saw us or they didn’t. If they don’t react, they haven’t seen us. If they change course, they saw us, and we discuss options. And we don’t need to pulse any thrusters till we’re way closer. It won’t help and might show us up. We wait.”

They sat in silence.

“I hate waiting,” Kay said.

“Want to play cards?” Ana asked.

***

Four hours later, everything was closer.

“Light speed delay is down to three minutes,” Lee said. “And we’re supposed to be braking shortly to come into a regular orbit.”

“And that Imperial ship?”

“Still sailing along. No changes in its orbit.”

“It’s got to have seen us by now,” Dirk said.

“No radar pulses since the first one,” Ana said. “If they see us, they’re being crafty.”

“When will it be in range?” Kay asked.

“In range of what?”

“Us. When can it fire on us?”

“Who knows,” Ana said. “Depends on what type of ship it is, what type of weapons it has, and the range of those weapons. We don’t know any of that.”

“What type of smugglers are you?” Kay asked. “You don’t know warship weapons.”

“Live ones. We don’t shoot it out with warships. We avoid that.”

“What if they demand you heave to and take an inspection?”

“Then we have two choices,” Ana said. “Heave to or don’t. If we don’t, they might shoot at us. And on this course, if I’m reading the navigator’s screens right, they’re going to come mighty close to us before we land.”

“Why haven’t they contacted us yet,” Dirk said. “They should have called earlier and run us down or run close enough to fire on us. We’re on a steady course, and we’re not going that fast. They should be able to catch us.”

“How fast are we going, relative to other ships?” Kay asked.

“That’s a meaningless question,” Dirk said. “For spacecraft, that is. What’s more important is how rapidly we can change our velocity. We have to accelerate to get out of a planetary atmosphere and decelerate to drop in and the same to meet an orbit. If the thing we’re chasing is a planet and it’s orbiting its star at ten thousand miles an hour, we have to be going the same speed to catch up with it. Faster to catch up, then start slowing down.”

“I know. But, if you have two spacecraft of the same class, then they can’t catch each other, correct?” Kay asked. “If one has a head start?”

“In a straight stern chase, no,” Dirk said. “But that almost never happens. Usually, orbits are crossing at some sort of an angle, and the important point is closest approach, where you can use weapons and scanners. At the point of closest approach, they can shoot at us. Then

we both whizz by."

"I'm not saying this correctly, if they approach..." Kay frowned. "I don't know orbits well enough."

"What I think she means," Ana said, "is we're set up to land on that planet, but we have to pivot and fire the main drive shortly to slow down enough to make orbit, correct?"

"Sure," Dirk said. "Lee has the calculations and the timing."

"And I'm assuming that the navigator here"—Ana pointed—"is using a reasonable sum for our decel and probably has us set up to do a few test orbits before dropping down gently to meet our customers, correct?"

"Two Gs," Lee said. "And three orbits to check out our landing site, then two to drop down."

"What if we recalculated to, say, two point seven five Gs, which I remember the engineer saying we could do?"

"Then we'd be able to wait longer till we start braking, but then that patrol boat will get closer and closer. Also, we'd break up into little pieces at that accel. Two point five Gs might be possible."

"But we could accelerate first, then decelerate harder for shorter. We'd end up in the same place, correct?"

"Well, it's more complicated than that," Lee said. "But the logic is correct."

"And we'd be moving farther away from the planet for a while as we sped up, wouldn't we?"

"We'd not really speed up," Dirk said. "It's more like firing sideways, and we'd be going slower relative to the planet, and our orbit shape would change, but I get your point. We can do something like that. But what's the point? They'd see our drive plume right away if we start firing. They're close enough. Passive sensors would pick us up."

"But they'd have to react, and that would tell us something. They'd be worried that we're running away, and they would start to chase us down. If we're lucky, they'll try to block us running for the jump limit, which will leave the planet clear for a landing."

"Won't work, Centurion," Dirk said. "If that's a navy boat, it has accel to spare, plenty of fuel. They can run us down, no matter what we do. Chase us to the jump limit and chase us back to orbit. Pass us in both directions."

"If they have accel to spare, why aren't they using it?" Ana asked. "They've been loafing along this whole time."

Dirk shrugged. "I don't know. It's a good question. Do we know what type of ship it is? What class?"

Ana looked at Kay. "Do you know what type of ship it is?"

"The ship that was on station when I left was a frigate. But that was

temporary—something else was coming in."

"Maybe this new ship can't catch us," Ana said. "We need to get the telescope on it, get some good pictures, and ask our Imperial navy ship identification specialist to tell us what class and the specifications."

Kay pointed at Dirk. "He's a ship identification specialist?"

"Nope."

She pointed at Lee. "Her?"

"Nope."

"You?"

"Not me," Ana said, unbuckling his belt and grabbing the hatch bar. "We need to talk to the expert."

He pulled himself down the corridor to the lounge, Kay following.

Scruggs and Dena were sitting at the table, practicing cheating cards one-handed. Gavin was watching them. Rocky the Whippet was sitting in a chair, wagging his tail.

"No, I see it when you face the cards," Dena said. "I'll know you're looking. You need to be smoother."

"This is harder than it looks. What's up, Centurion? Are we going to land?"

"I am shocked, shocked to find that gambling is going on here," Ana said.

Gavin laughed. So did Kay.

"We're not gambling, Centurion, not yet. We're not good enough," Scruggs said.

"Well, Baby Marine isn't," Dena said. "And why would you be shocked, anyway? Gambling is a pretty minor sin, all things considered."

"Speaking of sins," Ana said. "Are you familiar with the concept of redemption, of penance?"

"If you've committed a sin, then you can seek absolution by doing a penance. Like saying a prayer, or donating money to a charity," Scruggs said. "The bigger the sin, the bigger the penance."

"Exactly right," Ana said. "Well, Scruggs, we need your assistance. Did you take any video of that Imperial ship chasing us?"

"Every half hour, Centurion," Scruggs said, "like you asked."

"She's your ship identification expert?" Kay asked. "This youngster? She's not even a sensor operator."

"She's still learning about sensors, her and Nature Girl both," Ana said. "Both of them are getting better at it, but I wouldn't say they're a sensor operator yet. Where's the latest photo?"

Scruggs was silent. Dena waited, and when Scruggs didn't move, she tapped the screen in the lounge. "We used the course projection thing you showed us and pointed the telescope there, wide band

picture, and then used that focus down thing you showed us to zoom in on it. Here it is."

"Tell us, Scruggs," Ana said.

Scruggs put down the deck of cards. "Dena can tell you. It's her turn to do the scan."

"I can give you a length, that's all," Dena said. "I can't tell ship parts from food trays."

"Scruggs can," Ana said. "She knows ships."

"I don't know anything about merchant ships, Centurion," Scruggs said.

"It's surely not a merchant ship," Ana said. "It's an Imperial warship. Chasing us. Pilot has some decisions to make, and he needs to know the capabilities of this ship. If we get it wrong, we could all die."

Kay laughed. "Are you seriously suggesting that this girl, this kid, is going to tell us the capabilities of an Imperial warship with just a picture?"

"Yes. It's her penance."

"Why does she have to do penance?" Dena said.

"She lied to us."

"We've all been lying about something, Centurion," Scruggs said. "Every one of us."

"Yes, and every one of us will have to do a penance sooner or later. This is yours. Tell us about this ship."

Scruggs sat still for a moment. Rocky the Whippet sensed something in the air. His tail stopped swishing, and he let out a low growl. Then he barked once.

Scruggs bent and petted him. "It's okay, boy, it's not your fault." She rubbed his neck. "Let me see the picture again."

Dena put a zoomed-in image on the screen. Then she added a scale. "I just learned how to do the scale this week."

Scruggs stood and examined the image. She measured things with her fingers, zoomed in on the midsection, and counted something. "Imperial Castle class corvette. Designed for antimissile boat work and convoy protection. Max accelerations, two Gs. Good sensors—two different radars, thermal imaging, auto-scanning telescopes. Armament is eighty tiny missiles, which double as mines. They can be counter missiles or regular ones. The missiles aren't fast, nor are they shielded, so any sort of disruption field will stop them, so it's zero threat to a real warship. And a real warship could run away from the missiles. But they can heavily damage any sort of merchant ship, and they'll shred a missile boat that comes within range. They might have either a mass driver-style Gatling gun or a small laser, depending on where they were built."

“Defensive weapons?” Ana asked.

“Not even a sandcaster,” Scruggs said. “Any sort of energy weapon will tear them apart.”

“Anything else?”

“Crew of fifty, sixty. Low endurance. The missiles can double as mines, but they’re not that smart. They attack anything within range. Not a lot of storage for fuel or consumables. Can’t stay on station more than a couple weeks before it needs fuel and food. It doesn’t have a purification plant—it needs a military tanker or a shipyard to get fuel from.”

Scruggs sat.

“You sure of this?” Kay asked.

“Anything else, Centurion,” Scruggs asked.

“No. And you’re forgiven, Private.”

“Thank you, Centurion,” Scruggs said.

“I asked, is she sure of this?” Kay asked. “And how does she know this?”

“Engineer,” Ana said. “Two Gs. Can we outrun it?”

“Sure,” Gavin said. “We’ve got plenty of fuel, and we can leave it in our dust. How fast do the missiles go?”

“Three Gs at best,” Scruggs said. “They’re slow.”

“Tell the pilot,” Ana said. “We can’t let it get much closer, not with those missiles. We need to run away, and we can. We can beat them to the atmosphere, dive down, and land.”

“Have to slow down to land,” Gavin said. “Might mess up this running-away thing.”

“We won’t have to slow down,” Ana said. “The pilot can slow us down. He’ll aerobrake—we’ll get him to do one of his combat landings.”

Scruggs sucked in her breath. Dena groaned.

Gavin shook his head. “I better start tying things down.”

“Why?” Kay asked. “What’s wrong with his combat landings?”

“What isn’t?” Gavin said. “What isn’t?”

Chapter Twenty-Two

"Status change," the sensor operator said. "Target-3 has changed vector."

"Slowing down for planetary insertion?" Markus asked.

"No, sir. They've accelerated. They're heading away from the planet."

Markus lifted from his chair, using both hands to overcome the acceleration, and pushed forward to grab the sensor console. "Away from the planet? Confirm that?"

The sensor operator muttered something to the navigator next to him. The two fussed. Markus waited, silent. *No sense in jumping on them. They're still learning.*

It was a full minute and a half before the two stopped muttering and the sensor operator faced him.

"Confirmed, sir. Orbit is opening up. They're heading away from the planet."

"They've been hiding in stealth mode for the last eight hours, and now they decide to break cover? That makes no sense."

"I don't get it, sir. I haven't used any active sensors."

"Did we do anything that would have let them see us?" Markus let go of the sensor console, and the acceleration propelled him back to his chair. He caught it with one hand but thumped into the seat. Breathing heavily, he tapped his intercom. "Engineering, bridge. Did you do anything back there?"

"Engineering here. Do anything, sir?"

"Our target just went to max accel. Did you dump something or power up something or turn on a sensor or anything?"

"Just coasting back here, sir. Life support and sensors are powered. That's it."

"Well, something spooked them." Markus turned off his intercom. "Well, broadcast to them and order them to cut engines and stand by to be boarded for inspection."

***

"Keep ignoring them," Ana said. "We're fine." The two point five Gs shoved him back into his seat. "We've got the legs of them now." He punched the intercom. "Everybody back there all right?"

"I'm strapped into my couch, Centurion," Scruggs said.

"And I'm on my bed," Dena said. "Just laying here. Alone."

“Good to know,” Ana said.

“Want to know what I’m wearing?”

“Your answer will be either ‘lipstick’ or ‘a smile,’ and I’ve heard it before,” Ana said. He pushed the intercom again. “Where’s that dog?”

“Rocky’s with me, Centurion,” Scruggs said. “He’s tied on the bed. He’s okay.”

“Good, I like that dog.”

“You sound more concerned for the dog than some of the crew,” Kay said.

“More than most of the crew, really,” Ana said. “I like that dog. Speaking of people and liking. Or not. Engineer?”

“Strapped in back here. Nothing significant to report. Engines nominal.”

“Outstanding,” Ana said. He turned off the intercom. “Told you we’d be fine.”

“Fine until they launch,” Lee said.

The Heart’s Desire had ignored several increasingly irritated messages from the pursuing corvette, continuing on their way.

“Even after the launch, we’ll be fine.”

“That’s if you trust weapon specifications given to you by an eighteen-year-old ingenue who doesn’t understand consequences,” Kay said.

Ana grinned, then pushed the intercom for all stations. “Scruggs, guess what?”

“What, Centurion?”

“Adventure awaits,” he said.

Kay looked confused as the rest of the crew broke out laughing.

***

“Launch two missiles,” Markus said. “Warning shot.”

“Two missiles, aye,” the weapons rating said. “Firing.”

The ship shook as two missiles popped out of the attached pods, lit up, accelerated, and raced after the Heart’s Desire.

“That was quick, well done, Weps,” Markus said.

“Thank you, sir.”

“Extremely quick.”

The missiles tracked across the plot. They were racing after the ship, chewing up the distance.

“Well targeted, too,” Markus said, watching the dotted line of the track intercept the target. They were faster than the pursuing ship, marginally. “Right down their stern, at the engines. Good target selection.”

“Thank you, sir,” Weps said.

“Next time you do that, though, you should have them paralleling

the target track. That way, they know that it's a warning shot and that they're in no danger. We want them to know that we have the range and can hurt them, but we're not going to yet."

"Yes, sir," Weps said. "How will they know that if the track isn't targeted to hit them?"

"Well, when the shots come to closest approach, the timed detonation should be close off their side. They know that we can reach them and that, if we had changed the plot slightly, we'd be able to destroy them."

Weps looked at the sensor operator, then cleared his throat. "The timed detonation, sir?"

"You did set up a timed detonation before target is reached, didn't you?"

"Was I supposed to, sir? I don't know what that is."

"You set that missile to self-destruct before it hits that freighter, didn't you?"

Weps shook his head.

Markus covered his face with his hands. "That salvo is aimed directly at them? They're a freighter. It if hits, it'll blow them to smithereens. We want them to stop, not explode."

"Sorry, sir."

"Remotely detonate it now," Markus ordered.

"I don't—I mean, how do I..."

Markus hit his intercom. "Engineering. Cut all thrust. Right now." Seconds later, as the thrust died and the ship dropped into zero G, he leaped to the weapons console and shoved Weps out of the way.

His fingers danced through screens till a red Abort button showed on his screen. He tapped it once, then again. The button flashed for a moment, then went solid red.

"One, two, three." He reached twenty-seven before the button pulsed green and a buzzer sounded. Markus floated back to his seat. "Sensors, tell me you saw an explosion."

The sensor operator tapped his screen. "Nothing here, sir."

"Track those missiles."

"Checking... I have them."

"Have they veered off?"

The sensor operator shook his head. "Still on course, sir. Target impact in five minutes."

***

"They didn't fire a warning shot," Lee said. "They just let loose. Those missiles are tracking us."

"Are you sure? Our radar is not the best," Dirk said.

"No, it's not. But even it can detect decreasing range and constant

angle. Less than five minutes to impact."

"This is unexpected," Ana said.

Dirk tapped his intercom. "Engineer. Give us any reserve thrust you've got. We've got a pair of live missiles on a collision course."

"We don't have anything like that," Gavin said. "We're up to max already."

"We need something."

"Want me to get out and push?"

Dirk cursed, then hit the intercom. "Everybody, strap in tight. We've got missiles chasing us, and they'll hit in about four minutes. We're starting a combat landing right now. Hang on." He released the button, then hit it again. "Scruggs, confirm that damned dog is strapped in tight."

Scruggs did. Lee and Ana tightened their harnesses. Kay's eyes widened as Lee pulled a sick bag out of a pocket and stuck it to her chest for easy access.

"Are you prone to space sickness, Navigator?"

"Never been space sick. Not even once," Lee said.

"Then, why do you need the bag now?"

Lee flicked her eyes to Dirk. "You'll find out."

***

"Emperor's hairy mustache," the sensor operator said.

"That's not an appropriate report," Markus said. "Try again."

"Sorry, sir. They pivoted—reversed, I should say, and they're diving for the planet now. Full accel."

"They're not heading for the jump limit?"

"Thrusting in the opposite direction now, sir."

"Are the missiles tracking them?"

"They're trying, sir. They're pretty dumb and not that maneuverable."

"I need a vector to follow," Markus said. "Can we catch them?"

"We'll have to dive after them."

"Do it."

***

Gavin had supplied some extra power, and the Heart's Desire drove as fast as it ever had.

Dirk, Lee, Kay, and Ana were in the control room. Scruggs and Dena were lashed onto their beds but tied into the intercom.

"That's the best I can give you," Gavin said. "I've got the test flow rerouted into the mains, maybe ten percent more thrust. But if the extra flow overwhelms the nozzles, we'll explode."

“Got it,” Dirk said. “If the missiles hit us…”

“We’ll explode,” Gavin said. “I know. But this much power, the strain might cause the couplings to come loose, and—”

“We’ll explode,” Dirk said. “Did I mention the corvette behind us has other missiles? So, if these ones miss us, they can fire others, which, if they hit us…”

“We’ll explode. And I’m not totally sure that the thrust is one hundred percent balanced. When we hit atmo, we’ll pulse. If we start to flex the support trusses, one of the thrusters could break off.”

“And we’ll explode,” Kay said. “Right.”

“No, we won’t explode,” Gavin said.

“Oh.” Kay waited, but Gavin didn’t continue. “So, a thruster breaking off isn’t bad.”

“It’s very bad.”

“But we won’t explode?”

“Nope.”

“So, why is it bad, then?”

“Well, we won’t explode.”

“Good,” Kay said.

“Our thrust will be unbalanced, so we’ll shimmy, then probably flip.”

“Flip?”

“At this speed, the atmosphere is like solid concrete, and we’re going to be slamming into it as we flip over. It will be like hitting the ship with a giant hammer. Repeatedly.”

“That sounds bad.”

“It will crush us. Every single joint, weld, connection will break. We’ll be smashed into tiny pieces, and all of those pieces will burn up in seconds in the atmosphere. The crew will be squished like a bug under a giant rock, then smeared along a sidewalk, then the remains lit on fire.”

“Right, bad.”

“So, we’ll be shattered, crushed, and then burned. But we won’t explode.”

Ana chuckled. “Aren’t you glad you asked? Pilot, that cutter just lit its main drive. And those missiles are still behind us. Gaining.”

“Are they tracking us?”

“Like tabbos after a sheep dog,” Ana said. “They’re not gaining much, but they’re still gaining. Navigators screen says three minutes.”

Dirk clenched his teeth and hit the intercom. “Everybody hang on and secure your loose gear. This will only work once. And grit your teeth.”

“What—”

Dirk pushed the controls as far as they could go. The Heart’s Desire

stood on its nose and dove.

BAM.

The Heart's Desire bounced like a ball thrown onto a concrete floor, flipping end over end. Everybody was crushed down into their seat. A video screen snapped off the side of the cabin and crunched onto the control room floor. It shattered, but the pieces didn't launch but instead spread sideways. Muffled grunts filled the audio channel.

The overbearing downward pressure continued for another four seconds, then disappeared, and they lifted in their seats.

The grunts turned to screams, then quieted.

"What. The. Imperial. Anus," Gavin yelled. "Pilot, you incompetent ass. What was that?"

Dirk unclenched. "We bounced, hit the atmo, and bounced off. Down and then up. Where are those missiles?"

"Those missiles... the missiles still following us have fallen back," Ana said. "I only see one now. But it's gaining. We made a lot of distance, though. Still two minutes to intercept. Where did the other one go?"

"I hab bit minan tonge," Dena said.

"Report, everyone," Dirk said.

"Sprained finger and a big bruise on my thigh," Gavin said. "That hurt."

"I'm going to have bruises on my legs," Lee said. "And I see a thermal plume between us and the pursuing ship, behind that missile. I think it exploded trying to make the turn."

"I'm fine," Scruggs said, "but I puked up on myself."

"No injuries?" Ana asked.

"Nope."

"Sorry about the puke, Scruggs," Dirk said.

"It's okay. Rocky will eat it."

"Anybody else in trouble?" Ana asked. The radio was silent. "For the record, I have a damaged wrist." He held up his right arm.

Lee glanced back at him. "By the great Jupiter. Centurion, that must hurt." Ana's wrist was hanging loosely at a ninety-degree angle.

"It does, and I can't move it at all. Don't want to, either."

"How did that happen?"

"I was typing on the console, and the thrust snapped it. Old bones."

"I'll look at it first thing we land," Lee said. "You'll need a cast."

"You won't be much use with a cast on your hand," Kay said.

Ana dropped his wrist to his lap and cradled it there. He fumbled with his left hand on the outside of his seat. He held a revolver, which he sighted at the back of Dirk's head, then cocked it, left-handed, held it for a beat, then uncocked it. "Disagree. If there's anything important to do, I'll be able to do it."

“What do you need a revolver for?” Kay asked.

“To shoot the pilot if he messes up the landing.”

“But you’ll be dead, too.”

“Yes, but if I shoot him at the last moment, I’ll die happy. Or at least content. How long till we get on the ground?”

“Getting on the ground isn’t a problem,” Dirk said. “I can guarantee that part. Slowing down enough to not smash a big crater is the problem. How much fuel do those missiles have?”

“It’s got to run out soon,” Ana said. “But soon better be within the next minute because that’s how long till it’s in range.”

“And I have to pivot and slow, soon, otherwise we’ll burn up in the lower atmosphere, but the slow part is the problem.”

“Any other way to slow?”

Dirk swept the ship side to side, bleeding off speed, forcing the missile behind them to correct to track.

“Question is, will we be able to slow down before we burn up?”

***

“Should we hail them again, sir?” the sensor rating asked.

“And say what?” Markus said. “What would be an appropriate comment at this point?”

“Well, warn them to stop or they will be destroyed. Oh.”

“Yes, we’ve already passed by that option. We went from ‘Stand down’ to ‘We’re trying our hardest to blow you up.’ Things escalated quickly.”

“Sorry, sir.”

“This is not going to look good on my report,” Markus said. “But I will say that’s a heck of a pilot. Never seen a combat landing that steep before. Too bad that missile will get him.”

“Less than a minute’s fuel left on it, sir.”

Markus examined his screen. “He’ll have to slow down soon, or he’ll burn up.”

“Why would a smuggler have such a good pilot, sir?”

“Maybe she was military trained. Lots of good pilots leave the Imperial navy after a few years.”

“She?”

“Women usually handle Gs better than men. They make the best high-G pilots. Could be a man, too, I suppose. Either way, it’s something to see. Did we get an ID on the ship?”

“Just a freighter, sir. Nothing making it stand out. No beacon. It could be any of a hundred on the watch list.”

“Well, we can scan them now. Sheer off and take us back into a high orbit before we melt. Put every sensor we have on them.”

“Of course, sir.”

“And,” Markus said, flipping through his database, “do it quick. They don’t have much time left.”

***

“That cutter has stopped pursuing,” Lee said.

Dirk’s knuckles were white. “Not relevant.”

“She’s right, the flashes on the radar detector have changed,” Ana said. “The light pattern is shorter. That means signal strength is weaker.”

The cutter shook, and they were thrown violently left and right.

“Signal strength is not a concern right now,” Dirk said. “Surviving is.”

“That’s got to be the longest fueled missile I’ve ever seen,” Ana said. “This chase is going on forever.”

“They have a fixed amount of fuel,” Dirk said. “Once it’s gone, it’s gone.”

“Why hasn’t it run out yet?” Ana asked.

“Because it’s been a straight shot—that’s it.” Dirk tweaked the controls, and they slammed right and up.

“Not fun,” Ana said. The ship vibrated. “What’s up, Navy?”

“Burning out fuel,” Dirk said. He rolled the controls back, and they slammed left and down. “It has to correct, and side to side and up and down is the hardest to correct for, especially in this atmosphere.”

“There’s not much atmosphere here,” Ana said.

“Yet,” Dirk said. He slammed them sideways, and the broken monitor pieces flew up across the cabin.”

“Guurbh, bleech,” Ana said. He spat. “Busted plastic doesn’t taste good.”

Dirk slammed left, then right, then left.

Lee’s console bonged. “Pilot,” Lee said, “computer says we’re near heat levels. We’ll have to slow down now.”

“How soon?”

“Now, it says.”

Dirk slammed them right and left. Then right and left.

Another bong sounded, this time from Ana’s console.

“Dirk, we need to pivot now.”

“Missiles still there?”

“Yes,” Ana said. “Twenty seconds to impact.”

“Can’t yet. What’s that alarm?”

“Doesn’t matter,” Ana said. “Keep your nerve, Dirk. This can’t last forever.”

Gavin came on the line. “Ana, the engines are reporting high temperatures. It should be showing on your console. We need to pivot now.”

“No, we don’t,” Ana said.

“Ana, we—” Another louder, faster bong broke in. “Ana, we need to pivot now, that’s the—”

Ana reached over with his good hand and hammered the intercom off. He tapped screens until the bonging alarms dropped in volume. “That’s a good setting to know.” A few more taps, and all the alarms silenced. “Master alarm silence. I’m going to save that one. Put it on my main console screen.”

The air turbulence rattled the ship, crashing in the background.

“Are we going to die?” Kay asked.

“Everybody dies,” Ana said.

“I meant in the next two minutes,” Kay said.

“So did I,” Ana said. “Relax and enjoy the ride.” He laughed out loud. “Scruggs would say ‘adventure awaits.’”

The ship jerked.

“Thermal plume,” Lee said. “That trailing missile has exploded.”

Dirk let out a breath, returned the controls to neutral, and tapped a screen. The acceleration vanished, and they floated in their seats.

“Thank the Emperor,” Lee said.

“What happens now?” Kay asked.

Dirk tapped his console, and the Heart’s Desire began a slow one-hundred-eighty-degree pitch and ended upside down, with the engines pointing forward.

“Now,” Dirk said, tapping his console again. “Now, the rough parts start.” He tapped his console, and the main engines roared into life.

Chapter Twenty-Three

"Over there, sir, something coming from orbit," the sentry said.

Sergeant Shamus, senior squad leader of the Federalist unit staking out the landing site, looked up. "Those morons. What ever happened to sneaking in? The SoDems will see that all the way from the city."

"Long way to the city," the sentry said. "Take ground troops hours to get here."

"Take aircraft not very long to get here."

"But we're camouflaged, sir," the sentry objected, pointing.

Their unit was hidden in a dozen farmhouses of the hamlet. Eight trucks were in barns and under lean-tos, with men and women waiting in the houses. They had snuck the trucks and troops in one at a time over the last week. Overhead satellites could have seen the traffic but wouldn't have been able to guess at the concentration, and they had been careful to time their travel to when they hadn't been observed.

This crossroads was nothing special, two roads, a bridge over a river, houses, barns, and a couple of garages. But one road paralleled a minor river by a hundred meters, surrounded by flat fields. A spaceship landing between road and river would have an easy time of it and, once on the ground, would be able to fuel from the river on one side and unload to trucks on the road on the other. North and south of the river, the crossing road bisected four more roads, heading through forest, swamps, and low hills. Given an hour's head start, any cargo offloaded could be on its way to a dozen destinations.

"Camouflage doesn't matter if you have a giant yellow line of fire pointing to our location. Even those moronic SoDems can follow a giant arrow. I'm going to have words with Ms. Kay when she shows up."

"Yes, sir," the sentry said. "When you meet." He stared at the horizon. "This seems different than last time."

"Bigger ship," the sergeant said. "More weapons."

"And the... angle? It's different."

"Steeper."

"Faster. They're quiet, too."

The line of fire blew above them.

"Is he going to make it?" the sentry asked.

"Why are they so quiet?" the sergeant asked.

The yellow fire streaked above them, then past. The sonic boom rattled over them.

“Crap, they overflew,” the sergeant said. He hit the sentry in the shoulder. “Watch where they go. Don’t take your eyes off them.”

The sergeant ran into the center of the hamlet and raised his voice. “Everybody, mount up. Follow that ship.”

Crews streamed out of the houses and barns, and engines revved. After determining the chase direction, the sergeant and the sentry jumped into the lead truck, the sentry getting into the driver’s seat. The trucks formed into a convoy, headed south across the river, then turned east and headed for the hills in the distance. Clouds of dirt rose from the rutted track.

“We’ll never catch them,” the sentry said.

“Since they’re a spaceship, and we’re in a truck, that would make sense. They’re flying, and we’re driving. Flying is faster. Unless you have some sort of special driving skill that allows you to teleport these trucks.”

“I’m just thinking out loud, Sergeant.”

“Less thinking, more driving. You’re not paid to think.”

“We can catch up with them if we recross the river and take the connector by Marklevile.”

“That will take us north—away from them.”

“They’re going straight east. This road curves south to go past the swamp. We need to get farther north first, pick up a straighter road.”

“That won’t help if they come down short of the hills.”

“Then they’ll be in the swamp, and we’ll never get them out. I can turn at the next intersection.”

“Shut up.”

“Just trying to help.”

“Help by keeping your eyes on the road.” The sergeant’s comm buzzed. He keyed it. “Yes, I know. The weapons shipment has arrived. Like you, I can see the giant fireball heading for the mountains. Also, like you, I know that they’ve missed their landing site. But unlike you, rather than just calling people on the phone to complain, we’re on our way to get it. Thank you for your support.”

“You’re in a miserable mood today,” a voice said.

“Only mood he has,” the sentry said, shifting to higher gear.

“Eyes on the road. No talking. Driving.” The sergeant keyed his comm again. “Thank you for your concern with my mental health. I welcome all opportunities to become a better soldier. Currently, however, I have other concerns. Like getting this idiot to turn right at the next intersection.”

“It’s not just your mental health that you should be concerned with,” the voice said.

“What, oh great and good intelligence briefer, should I be concerned with if not trying to stay alive while careening across the

countryside with a half-witted driver?"

"SoDems just scrambled two fighters from the capital. Vectored south."

The sergeant's face blanked. He licked his lips. "What type?"

"The type with rockets."

"How sure are you of this?"

"Our source at the base called his friend in town, who called his mother, who called her sister, who called a friend at a different office, who called me. They all used the right codewords. Two fighters. They were scheduled to bomb up north, but this landing was too good to miss."

"If they launched now, they'll be here in less than two hours."

"They launched twenty minutes ago. Phone calls take time. They'll be above your last position in ninety minutes."

The sergeant clicked off his microphone and sat still.

"Sergeant?"

"What?"

"If we switch to the swamp road, we'll be undercover. Trees above. Maybe they won't notice us."

"They have heat sensors on the planes. And they won't need to search for us, either. We can't hide that landing. They'll have a good vector now. Plus, somebody will call them."

"This is messed up."

"They were supposed to come in slow and easy, a few quiet orbits, land in a field. We'd be waiting. We picked a spot with almost no satellite coverage. By the time the SoDems got a call, we'd have loaded up and been gone, hiding in the traffic flow, and they wouldn't be able to find us."

"What do we do now?"

"They know where we're going. Or will shortly. How fast can we get there?"

"River road is the fastest. Everybody can see us, but we can get into the hills quickest."

"Do it."

The comm crackled again. "You still there?"

"Yes, just organizing the pickup."

"I've got more good news."

"Hit me."

"The SoDems aren't the only ones who saw that fireball. The local Republican militia called and asked if we were getting an unscheduled arms shipment."

"You didn't tell them, for Emperor's sake, did you?"

"I said if it was unscheduled, I wouldn't know about it, would I?"

"Good plan."

“Except he said they were going to check it out.”

“Check out how?”

“He’s got a militia company in the area. He’s sending them to ‘offer any assistance they can.’ His troops are on the way now, and from the looks of that landing vector, they’ll probably beat you there.”

***

The Heart’s Desire sat, steaming in the middle of a plume of black smoke. The ship had come to ground in a vineyard, gouging a trail through the sandy soil, leaving piles of shredded grape vines behind it. The bow of the ship and most of the containers were covered with the trunks of burning vines.

The rear ventral engineering hatch dropped open, and Gavin jumped down. He hopped away from the ship, a bandage on his hand, waving the smoke away. The ramp dropped but stuck three feet from the ground—piles of crushed roots prevented it from deploying completely.

Scruggs and Dena ducked under the hull, then hopped off. Rocky bounded down the ramp and leaped off after them. The two crewmen and dog stumbled across the crushed foliage and met up with Gavin.

“You two puke?” Gavin asked.

“Earlier, during the missile chase,” Scruggs said. “But Rocky licked it up. Good boy, Rocky.”

The dog heard his name, wagged his tail, and sniffed the crushed grapes.

“He is a good boy. What’s wrong with you?” She pointed at Gavin’s hand.

“Smacked it during the chase. Doesn’t hurt much. Yet. How about you?”

Dena held up her bruised, abraded wrists.

“Handcuffs?” Gavin asked.

“Banged against the restraints strapping me to my bed. So, sort of, yes. I should have got a proper pair of handcuffs. I might get more use out of them.”

“Why do you need handcuffs?” Scruggs asked. “For what?”

Gavin and Dena exchanged looks. “Maybe we should get her a book or something?” Dena said.

“That’s outside my experience,” Gavin said. “More your line of work.”

“What are you two talking about?” Scruggs asked.

“Ask your mother,” Gavin said, pointing at Dena.

“She’s not my mother.”

“Sometimes, it feels like it,” Dena said.

Dirk and Kay appeared at the head of the ramp and ducked,

dropping to the ground. Both had matching black eyes.

"The two of you get in a fistfight?" Gavin asked. "Who won?"

"I hit the control console and banged off it," Dirk said.

"Whereupon he banged into my head. Thus, two black eyes," Kay said. "Lovely landing. Just lovely."

"We're here," Dirk said. "Any landing you can walk away from is a good one."

"Barely walk away from," Kay said. "And we'll have a long walk to get back to where the trucks are waiting for us."

"You said deliver to New Oregon, and we're on New Oregon. Weapons are here. Now payment."

"Gotta offload them first," Kay said.

"Trust me, nothing gives me greater pleasure," Dirk said. "That corvette will have commed somebody, somewhere, and they'll be looking for us. Scruggs, get up top with Centurion's rifle and his scope."

"Where is he?"

"Lee has him in the med pod. His busted wrist is worse than it looks. She needs to realign the bones and then put a cast on it. Won't take long but needs to be done now. And she wants him full of good pain killers before she does it."

"Understood, Pilot," Scruggs said. "Rocky, come with me, boy."

She and Rocky climbed up the ramp and disappeared into the ship.

"Engineer," Dirk said, "how long will it take to drop those three containers and lift?"

"Lift without the containers?"

"We'll buy new ones."

"If Dena helps me, I can jack the first two down in fifteen minutes each and drop the chains. The third one will take some doing to get it clear of the first two, but if we extend the boom, we can drop it down. Couple hours at most."

"Then we can lift?"

"We have to be careful not to hit them as we go but sure. You'll have to do a hop over them or wait till they're unloaded and push them out of the way."

"You can't dump my weapons here," Kay said. "That wasn't the deal."

Dirk shaded his eyes with his hands and scanned the field. "Funny, it looks like the planet New Oregon." He sniffed, then coughed from the smoke. "Smells like it, too."

"The deal was to deliver them to a specified landing site."

"That didn't work. Be happy they're here. Be happy you're here. Alive."

"I have to wait for my people," Kay said. "I need them to help

unload."

"Comm them," Dirk said.

"I don't know who to comm," Kay said. "They were going to watch that site—the one you were supposed to land at—for two weeks, which gave us plenty of time to get there."

"Money first or no unloading."

Scruggs called from the top of the ship, "Pilot, dust on the northern horizon. Four vehicles coming down a hill."

"Only four?" Kay yelled.

"Yes," Scruggs said. "They're zigzagging down the hill. Could be others behind the hill."

"Looks like your friends are coming," Dirk said. "We're here. Your friends are on their way. Let's trade."

"There should be eight trucks. That was the plan."

"Maybe some are broken. Or perhaps they don't have enough drivers. We've had that problem before."

"Not enough drivers? Who doesn't know how to drive a truck?"

"That's not important. Four or eight—"

Scruggs yelled, "Pilot, another group. Coming up fast from the west—down that big road we overflew on the way. Eight trucks."

"How long till they get here?"

"Not sure. They have to get off that road and come across country. Same with the first four. The first four just left a dirt road up north, and they're heading our way. They'll get here first."

"Thanks, Scruggs," Dirk yelled. He raised his eyebrows at Kay. "Twelve trucks with drivers. Plenty to unload with. Our money?"

"Fine." Kay reached into her pocket and produced a payment chip. "Here." She produced a second chip. "And also, here."

Dirk took both chips. "A pleasure doing business with you." The container above them screeched as Gavin unlocked the magnets holding it, and it swung on the chain assembly. "We best get things sorted. Our talented engineer will have these down in no time, and we'll be on our way. I'll hop into the ship and check these." Dirk gave a crossed-chest salute. "The Empire."

Kay didn't return it. "You should say free trades or something like that. Empire isn't exactly popular here."

"Next time," Dirk said, heading into the ship.

Gavin and Dena dropped the lower containers, squishing a pile of grape vines underneath.

Scruggs continued reporting on the progress of the two groups of trucks.

Twenty minutes later, Lee and Ana walked down the ramp.

Ana had a great deal of difficulty getting to the ground. His right arm had a hard wrist to elbow cast, but he refused help. The third

container swayed and banged above them, then ground to a halt. The two groups of trucks were visible coming across the fields, in lines of four and eight.

Gavin dropped from the ramp. “We’ve got a problem. The third container is jammed. I’ll have to cut the chains, but it will smash down.”

Ana stared at Gavin. “Well, we can’t have that. Green. Very green. I like green.”

Gavin looked him in the eye. His pupils were dilated. “Lee, what did you give him?”

“The biggest muscle relaxant I had. I had to jam his bones back into place.”

“Good stuff,” Ana said. “I really like green.”

Four trucks crested a ridge five hundred meters away.

Kay reached into her holster and pulled out a revolver. “Those four trucks over there. They’re not a Federalist unit. They’re Republicans.”

“Your enemy?” Ana said.

“Our coalition partner,” Kay said.

“Even worse,” Ana said.

“They’ll try to take the weapons.”

“We can’t have that, either,” Ana said.

Dirk hopped down from the ramp. “Kay, what’s going on with these chips?”

“What is going on with these payment chips, Navy?”

“There’s a problem.”

“Which is?”

“They’re postdated.”

Ana pointed his revolver at Kay. “And we certainly can’t have that, either.”

Chapter Twenty-Four

"Where's our money?" Dirk demanded. He, Lee, and Ana faced Kay.

Gavin and Dena banged the stuck container with hammers. Scruggs stayed up top, reporting on the arriving trucks.

"It's all there. Twice as much," Kay said. "Will you put that revolver down, Ana?"

"No," Ana said, gun still pointed at her. "I'd like to hear the outcome of this discussion first."

"I coded those chips for fifty thousand credits. That's twice as much money as Cheong promised you."

"Yes, but we can't get it for three months," Dirk said. "And your weapons are here now."

"There is an issue with the weapons."

"You can't put that on us," Ana said. "You picked them. Your guy organized them. We're just transport."

"You're so much more than that," Kay said. "Ana, I've watched you. You trained that girl on all sorts of rifles, revolvers, shotguns, and she's good at them."

"Natural talent," Ana said. "And irrelevant."

"Maybe, but the teaching matters, too. You're an experienced soldier. You've had experience whipping troops into shape. That's what we need. And she'll serve as an example."

"How will she serve as an example?" Dirk asked.

"She's the same age as a lot of our recruits. They think they know what they're doing, but they don't. Seeing her, how professional, how competent she is, will be a wake-up call. Her example, along with Ana's training, will help tons."

"You could have just asked to hire him," Dirk said.

"I would have said no," Ana said.

"And, you, Captain Dirk. What about you?"

"She's calling you 'Captain' Navy, not Loverboy. This can't be good."

"An Imperial-trained starship pilot. An aristocrat. You evaded the blockade and brought in our biggest shipment of arms yet. You'll be a huge asset in planning how to avoid the Imperials, the Nats and the Confeds. We need somebody like you for the operation we're planning."

"What operation is that?"

"I can't tell you, but we'll need you. And your navigator, she's a

pilot, too."

"She's just a navigator."

"A navigator, yes. Also, the junior pilot who picked up you and I in that... feces incident."

"You mean where he smeared himself in dog poop?" Ana said.

"We know what she means, Centurion," Dirk said.

"I know. I just love saying it."

"Junior Pilot. Navigator. Medic too. Almost a doctor."

"She's not a doctor," Ana said. "Not really."

Kay tapped his arm. "What's this, then? Frozen tabbo fur?"

"She helps out."

"With your crew," Kay said. "I've got a shipload of arms, a super soldier who knows how to use all of them, knows small unit tactics, and has a youngster who can demonstrate them for the others. I've got my ground training cadre. I've got a pilot, navigator, and engineer team—one an officer used to commanding starships. That's my orbital team."

"They're not that great," Ana said.

"Thanks for your support, Centurion," Dirk said.

"I've seen better, Navy. But you are doing well with what you have."

"Did he just compliment you?" Dena said.

"It's the drugs," Dirk said. "He'll apologize for the compliment later."

Kay pointed at the ship. "If you and your crew can land that beat-up crate in a combat landing while being chased by a corvette, they can do pretty much anything."

"I thought you felt Gavin was incompetent. The microwave thing."

"That was just to yank his chain. The engines and thrusters and fuel system and life support work great, even after all the abuse you've given it."

Kay waved. "I've got all that, and I've got one other important thing."

"What's that?" Dirk asked.

"I've got your money," Kay said. "Double or nothing."

***

They were still arguing as two trucks approached. Two others waited at the top of a ridge a kilometer away. Kay refused to bend, and even after Ana fired a round into the ground at her feet, she smiled at him.

"You're bluffing," she said.

"I never bluff," Ana said.

“That’s true. That’s why I’m not worried. If you wanted to shoot me, you’d just do it, not talk about it or warn me. If we’re still talking, then I’m in no danger.”

“I wouldn’t be so optimistic,” Ana said.

“That’s one of the things I like about you. Guaranteed pessimism, but you work through it.”

Ana pointed his revolver at her and glared. She smiled again. “Let’s get this stuff unloaded.”

“Not until the money is sorted out. Everybody, get down here.”

Dena and Gavin clambered down the outside of the hull using handholds, then dropped on the piles of vines. Scruggs opened the main air lock and dropped a rope ladder from its ventral hatch and shimmied down.

Everybody faced Ana and Kay.

“Ms. Kay has offered to pay us.”

Dena threw up her hands. “Hooray for us.”

“In three months.”

Dena dropped her hands. “Bad news for us.”

“Twice as much,” Dirk said.

“That’s good. Or is it bad. Why wait three months?”

“She wants to hire us as trainers,” Dirk said.

“Pilot, navigator, and engineer I need for a ship-based mission we’ve been doing. Centurion here will be a trainer, as will Ms. Scruggs. And they seem to think you have some useful skills as well, Ms. Dena,” Kay explained.

“I’m good in the woods,” Dena said. “And in a fight. But we didn’t sign on to be in your fight.”

“That’s why I’m offering you twice as much money for only three months. Ninety days of work, helping with our cause.”

“We could take the weapons and leave.”

“We need the weapons,” Kay said as the two trucks pulled up. “We need you. We’re fighting for our independence here. Will you help us?”

The trucks parked in a ragged line, parallel to the Heart’s Desire’s landing. One had a crew of two in the cab.

One hopped out and approached the Heart’s Desire. He wore a uniform of dark green camouflage with green-forage hats. The tailgate of both trucks dropped a squad of eight soldiers with rifles debouched for each. They formed a semicircle facing the crew, rifles hanging loosely.

“Crap,” Kay said, as the troops spread out, surrounding her.

“Centurion, might want to holster that weapon,” Dirk said. “These people don’t look friendly.”

“I’m not friendly, either,” Ana said. “You brought your troops here

to steal the weapons."

"They're not my troops," Kay said. "They're Republicans."

"Which means nothing to me."

"They might kill you and take the weapons."

"And that's not your fault?" Ana asked.

"No."

"Well"—Ana cocked the revolver and pointed it at Kay's head —"whatever happens next happens to you first."

The lead officer walked up and regarded them from six feet away. "Are you going to shoot her?"

"It's on my list for today," Ana said. "But it's a long list, and it's been a long day. I might not have time. Who are you?"

"I am Màrius Boadella. You may call me Boadella. That is my nom de guerre."

"Nom de guerre? Here we go," Ana muttered. "Any minute, he'll be saying 'Vive la revolution.'"

"These are the men and women of Task Force Boadella."

"Named after you, no doubt," Ana said.

"I have that honor," the man agreed. "Why are you going to shoot Ms. Kay?"

"Is that her name?" Ana asked.

"I have no idea. It is what I know her by. Ms. Kay, I thought you were off-world getting weapons."

"And now I'm back with them, Boadella."

"We were not told of this. Our agreement was to share."

"I've only just landed. We will be sharing."

"Or perhaps you planned on not telling us and keeping them for yourself."

"We can agree on an equitable share-out, of course," Kay said.

"Now that we have found you. Well, we will take possession of these weapons ourselves. We can use them as well as you. And we will decide how they are shared."

"They haven't been paid for yet," Ana said.

"That is not my concern," Boadella said.

"Not true, you've been paid in full, twice what you were offered," Kay said.

"But not good for three months," Dirk said, "And we also need another key."

"Which I'll get you in three months, after you've trained us on everything."

"Which is—"

"Not my concern," Boadella said. "Give us these weapons."

"No," Dirk said.

Boadella motioned, and the squads behind him raised their rifles.

“Hands up.”

The crew raised their hands except Ana, who kept pointing his revolver at Kay.

“Sir,” Boadella said, “drop your weapon.”

“No. I made a promise to this lady.”

“Which was what?”

“That I would shoot her first if anything happened to anybody.”

“Oh.” Boadella put his hands on his hips. “I approve of that promise. You may keep your weapon. What are your names?”

“You can call me Senior Centurion Anastasios, kiddo.” Ana turned to Dirk and winked at him where Boadella couldn’t see. “The snooty looking one is Duke Durriken Friedel, late of the Imperial navy.”

“An Imperial duke. Here? You are the Duke Friedel?”

“Since I’m here in a military capacity, you should use my rank. I’m a commander in the Imperial navy.”

“A pilot?”

“Interstellar and interplanetary, yes. Also, all orbital capable ships.” Dirk put down his hands. “Lee is our Navigator and also a medical doctor. Gavin is our ship’s engineer. Dena is our wilderness survival specialist, and Scruggs here is Ana’s assistant.”

“These weapons are from the Empire?” Boadella asked.

“The Empire will not countenance smuggling,” Dirk said. “They do not support your so-called rebellion, as they have made clear. This planet is protected by treaty and is, generally, considered in the sphere of influence of the Nats, but perhaps the Confeds would dispute that.”

“It is not a revolt,” Boadella said. “We are the legitimate government of New Oregon.”

“That is not my concern.”

“And what is your concern?” Boadella asked.

“My concerns are my own business,” Dirk said. “But I am curious as to how you think killing an Imperial duke and his handpicked crew will help your cause. I’m especially curious as to how you plan to get more weapons shipments if you kill the crews of the ships running the blockade.” Dirk dropped his hands. “I believe we can all put our hands down now.”

The others dropped their hands. Boadella waved at his troops, and everybody relaxed.

“Now,” Dirk said, “these weapons are for the Federalist troops supporting the government. But we have some commercial issues as well. Do you have payment?”

“That is not my... obligation,” Boadella said.

“You’ll be paid in three months,” Kay said.

“That was not the arrangement, and speaking of arrangements, how

were you going to offload these weapons if these... Republican gentlemen and women didn't show up?"

A second set of trucks drove up from the south, on the opposite side of where the Republican trucks were parked. There, motors had been masked by the still-running Republican engines. Eight trucks pulled into line below them. Crew of three carrying rifles dropped out of the cabs and scrambled up the hill, rifles at port arms facing the group.

"I have some ideas," Kay said.

***

The two groups faced off, weapons held ready but not pointing at each other. Kay dropped back to discuss things with Sergeant Shamus. Boadella kept his Republican squads facing the Federalist ones, and the two groups glared at each other from opposite sides of the Heart's Desire.

"We have a problem," Dirk said. "Or an opportunity, I suppose. Same thing. Kay did give me two credit chips, total fifty-thousand credits. Problem is, they're time locked. They either need another key, or we have to wait three months to get paid."

"I don't want to wait three months," Gavin said. "Let's get the key."

"Normally, I'd send Centurion to scare her, but for some reason, she isn't scared of him."

"That's because she knows he's attracted to her," Dena said. "He's going all goo-goo eyed over her, so she knows he won't hurt her."

"He put a revolver in her face and said he'd shoot her," Scruggs said.

"That's his way of flirting," Dena said. "Men are kind of stupid that way. They don't always show what they mean."

"He flirts by poking her with a gun?"

"Didn't you ever have some guy pull your hair or something like that when you were younger, make fun of you, who later turned out to be attracted to you?"

"Never," Scruggs said. "Never, just Jimmy McFarleigh when I was in junior high. He always pulled the braids I wore, for years, but he... Oh. Oh."

Dena raised her eyebrow. "He was pulling your braids for years, and you're only just figuring this out?"

"He was kind of cute," Scruggs said. "I didn't realize."

"As exciting as adolescent crushes are, we should discuss our current situation," Ana said. "You know, the two groups who want to kill us."

"They don't both want to kill us," Dirk said.

"Yet. Not yet."

"They want the weapons," Dirk said. "They won't fight each other

directly, not unless something bigger happens. We can still sort this out."

"But do we," Gavin said, "want to sort it out, I mean? Can't we just leave?"

"They won't let us do that. If the only way to get those weapons is to kill us, that's what they'll do."

"Let's make that plan B," Dena said. "Or even plan C."

"They want trainers," Ana said. "Why not stay and train them?"

"Train them?" Lee said. "Train them here?"

"They're troops. They have a war. They have weapons. Why not take the extra money and teach them a thing or two? It's not like we have a lot of appointments in the next while. Navy here must have learned something of tactics in that fancy school of his. At least logistics or something like it. The navigator"—Ana waved his cast arm—"Is also a doctor, I'll bet they don't have enough of those. Engineer can fix their microwaves. Scruggs can help me out."

"You think you can help them out?" Dirk said.

"I've helped worse," Ana said, "with less."

Boadella raised his voice and yelled something at Kay, who yelled back. Both sides raised their rifles. Boadella and Kay's voices dropped, but the rifles didn't.

"And one thing we can't have here is a firefight," Gavin said. "Nothing good will come of that. Not for us or them."

"One other thing," Ana said. "And it's not my thing. I'm just throwing it out there for the rest of you. These people are the legitimate government. That part is true. Those Socialist Democrats definitely had help from the Nats. This is a Nat inspired takeover."

"And we care, why?" Dirk said.

"Because this planet was friendly to the Empire, the Empire that you served for years."

"Which also put me in jail."

"That's your fault, not the Empire's," Ana pointed out. "If you were better at your job, they wouldn't have had to jail you."

"That's a pretty mean way to look at it," Dirk said.

"And yet not inaccurate," Ana said. "From a geopolitical point of view, these people are sort of Imperial allies—de facto, if nothing else—with plenty of other real allied planets who are near National space who will be watching closely to see what the Empire does here. They'll understand that there can't be any direct help but a secret cadre arriving to help them fight. That will sound good."

Ana gestured to the arguing groups. "Perhaps we should help them, just because it's the right thing to do."

"You're telling us we should do the right thing?" Dirk said.

"Yes."

“Lee, what type of drugs did you give him?” Gavin asked.

“More than I should have,” Lee said. “But he’s right. It would be nice to do the right thing for once.”

“If we do, I want more money,” Gavin said.

“I have some thoughts about that,” Dirk said. “I can get us more money.”

“I’m always happy to blow things up,” Ana said.

“I don’t like it,” Gavin said. “I didn’t sign up for being a ground pounder.”

“Don’t go, then. Stay with the ship,” Dena said. “I wouldn’t mind getting out into the woods for a while.”

“Miss the old life, do you, Nature Girl?” Ana said. “Living in the woods, killing your own food, starting fires by rubbing two sticks together?”

“Staying somewhere that doesn’t smell like feet, having as much water as I want and new people to talk to. I like that part.”

“What? I’m not an engaging conversationalist?”

“If I want to talk about weapon calibers, yes. Or how to make my own ammunition, you are. But I’d like a little broader selection of conversations,” Dena said. “And for that money, I can show people how to start fires in the woods.”

“Pilot,” Lee said, “You know my feelings about this. I’m still loyal to the Empire.”

“And yet you don’t want to go back there,” Ana said. “Always suspicious of that.”

“We’re here,” Dirk said. “They have money. We can make enough in three months to set us up for a long while. If we’re careful with the risk, we should be fine. Stay away from real combat and keep the ship somewhere safe. And if things go bad, we can fly away.”

“Which these poor folk can’t,” Gavin said. “This won’t end well for them.”

“Something you want to share, Engineer?” Dirk said.

“No. Just these rebellions never end well for the people fighting them.”

“For once, I agree with our shady engineer here,” Ana said. “These people don’t have any idea what they’re getting into. We do. I say we take their money, stay three months, then hoof it. All in favor?” Ana raised his hand, as did Lee, Dena, and Scruggs.

“All against?” Ana said. Gavin raised his hand, then dropped it. “I’m staying on the ship regardless.”

Dirk kept his arms crossed.

“Where do you stand on this, Navy?” Ana asked.

“I’m not really in charge,” Dirk said. “But I’ll go with the group.”

“We need somebody in charge,” Ana said. “And they really need

somebody in charge, from the looks of it. That's supposed to be you, Mr. Big Duke person."

"I'm not a ground commander," Dirk said.

"No, but you can play one for the vids," Ana said. "Walk a lot. Get a swagger stick. Swagger yourself, for that matter. Leave the rest to me. I'll whip them into shape."

They all looked at him.

Dirk uncrossed his arms. "Fine, let me go talk to our new employer."

"Adventure awaits," Scruggs said.

Chapter Twenty-Five

The Republican and Federalist groups faced the Heart's Desire between their two rows of trucks. They weren't pointing their rifles at each other, but everyone with weapons had their hands on it.

"We will take our share now, then," Boadella said. "Half of all the weapons that have arrived."

"These are purchased by Federalist funds," Kay said. "They're our weapons. Once we've inventoried them, we'll arrange to ship you your share."

"I am not convinced that will happen," Boadella said.

"You doubt my word?" Kay said.

"I doubt your record," Boadella said. "You are well aware of incidents in the past where we didn't get our fair share."

"That wasn't me, and there have also been issues with the original Confed supplied supplies."

"That wasn't me, either," Boadella said. "I think—"

"I think we should get a move on before those planes get here," Sergeant Shamus said.

Dirk and the others walked up.

"Planes? What planes?"

"Two ground-attack planes are outbound from the capital on their way here. They'll be here soon. We have to get things sorted out quickly."

"We need to discuss—" Boadella said.

"No, we do not." Dirk said.

"Look, Mr. Imperial—"

Dirk snapped his fingers. "Be still. And it's not Mr. Imperial. My rank is subcommander. Use it from now on. I will decide who gets which weapons when and how they are used."

"You said that you weren't here representing the Empire—"

"Mr. Boadella," Ana said. "If you and your people think for just a moment, do you really believe that the arrival of a crack naval officer, and his support staff with an entire shipload of weapons that somehow got through the blockade is a coincidence? An Imperial blockade?"

"We've had shipments before—"

"Not this good. Not this much. Not with this type of crew accompanying them. Clearly, somebody somewhere wants to give you some help. But if you turn it down, I'm sure that will be the end of the

help. And of the crews. And the blockade running and the weapons." Ana crossed his arms. "My Lord Duke, if these people don't need our help, then let's leave them these to fight over and be gone. And tell the others no sense coming."

"What others?" Boadella said. "Are there others?"

Dirk blinked, then grinned. "Centurion, please don't talk about things that can't be shared. But this is a good suggestion. Mr. Boadella, Ms. Kay, either I decide how this share-out goes and you take my orders, or we'll leave you to shoot each other in peace, and that's the last you'll see of my crew. And of our friends. Any friends we might have. Well?"

Kay grinned, then saluted him. "As you wish, Subcommander Friedel. Your orders?"

Dirk cocked an eyebrow at Boadella. "Well?"

Boadella and the sergeant walked back to their troops and conferred.

Dirk leaned down to Kay. "Fifty thousand credits in three months. That's payment for the weapons. We'll take it. If you want us to train and advise, that's another twenty-five thousand."

Kay reached into her pocket and pulled out another credit chip. "Okay."

Dirk glanced at her pocket. "How many of those do you have in there?"

"Enough. What about these chowderheads?"

"Let me deal with them," Dirk said. "Me and Centurion can do this."

"Outstanding, as Ana would say."

The discussion with Boadella's group had gotten heated, but then Boadella threw up his hands and hissed something. They all quieted, and Boadella stalked back to Dirk. "Very well. If you, Mr. Imperial, decide on how the weapons are split up, we will agree. Provided we get some of the trainers to go with them as well."

Dirk crossed his arms and glared at Boadella. His sergeant muttered something in his ear. Boadella grimaced, then faced Dirk and saluted. "Sorry, Subcommander."

Dirk uncrossed his arms. "Ms. Kay, do you have a place where the ship can be hidden? One of our containers was damaged in the landing. We need a secure base to work on it, one that the Nats won't locate."

"We have a spot up north," Kay said. "Near a lake, beyond the reach of the geostationary satellites. You can fix the ship there."

"Outstanding," Dirk said. "Mr. Boadella, that container there"—he pointed to the dropped port container—"contains your weapons. Mixed small arms and grenades. They are already loaded in two

trucks. The trucks should be drivable. Get your crews in there and start them up. Ms. Kay will get the two here"—he pointed at a dropped starboard container—"also, two trucks. The remaining container we will make safe for flight and fix it later. Centurion?"

"Sir?" Ana said, bracing for attention.

Dena stifled a giggle.

"How will you assign your training team?"

Ana looked at Boadella's group and then at Kay's. "Mr. Boadella's group needs it more. Myself, Private Scruggs, and Ms. Dena will accompany him. The rest of you should proceed with Ms. Kay and organize the ship."

Dirk leaned down and spoke softly. "Ana, you sure about this?"

"Yes," Ana whispered back. "Kay's people are better trained and disciplined, and it shows. You, the punk, and the medic aren't going to be any good in a ground fight regardless. I can keep the two girls alive with these Republican idiots and train them. You three offload that last container. Make the ship safe for takeoff. Figure out how we're going to get out of here. I've got a planetary comm set in my room. I can keep in touch with you. Kay has something sneaky set up, and that involves a starship. You can take care of that. Just come back and get us if something goes sideways."

"Aren't you afraid that I'll leave you behind? Or run as soon as we get unloaded?"

"First, you wouldn't get all of your money if you left us. Second, Lee and Gavin would be upset."

"The money's in my pocket. I could use it to bribe Gavin, and Lee listens to me."

"But then you'd have to leave Scruggs behind, too."

"And which one of them would be upset with that?"

"You would, Navy, you would," Ana said. "Leave her behind? That's something you won't do." Ana tapped Dirk on the shoulder, then strode over to Boadella's group. "You heard the subcommander. Get that container open. Get those trucks moving. And SAFE THOSE RIFLES first," Ana said.

Boadella yelled, and his troops scattered.

Kay nodded at Sergeant Shamus, and he picked a group of four and sent them to unlock the other container.

Dirk clasped his hands behind his back and strode over. "Sergeant Shamus, is it?"

"Sir?"

"Those planes that you referred to. When will they get here?"

The air boomed, and a low-flying plane roared over them. All the plants shook, and a pile of splintered vines blew off the top of the Heart's Desire and dropped to the ground.

“Real soon now, sir,” Shamus said.

Chapter Twenty-Six

“Get those containers offloaded now,” Ana yelled. “Move, move, move. Scruggs, Dena, get your weapons and get that hostile environment camping package that Dena made up and then get out here. Scruggs, get the radios out of my room. Bring my rifle. Pilot, get ready to lift this ship as soon as those trucks are on the way. Engineer, now would be a good time for a beacon to start broadcasting, to confuse things. An Imperial Beacon. Understand?”

“Got it,” Gavin said. “Skipper, I’ll start everything up and get the beacon going. You and Lee need to lock that other container on.”

Dirk, Lee and Gavin raced off.

Ana gestured at the others. “Ms. Kay, Boadella, Shamus with me.”

Ana marched over to the nearest truck and pointed to the hood. “Somebody display a map of this area. Now.” Shamus fiddled with his comm, and a topographic map of the area showed.

“Right, what enemy forces are there near here?” Ana asked.

“We don’t take orders from you. What makes you think you can make demands here?” Boadella asked.

“Nothing at all,” Ana said. “But while you argue over who is in charge, I’m going to observe what information is available, orient myself to the battle space, make a decision, and act on it. Then I will repeat that process. Given my experience versus yours, I anticipate I will have escaped with the bulk of the weapons while you are still marshaling your arguments for being in charge.”

Shamus tapped, and a selection of lights appeared to the far south and west. “Those are the closest SoDem garrisons. They’ve got trucks, but they’re not rapid reaction or anything. It will take them some time to get on the road. If we get moving soon, they won’t be able to catch us.”

“We should discuss the division of the weapons first,” Boadella said.

“Discuss away. But not with me,” Ana said. “Where are these weapons going? What’s their ultimate destination?”

Kay shook her head at Shamus. Ana caught the look. “Won’t say in front of the others, really?”

“We all have our secrets, Ana,” Kay said.

“Emperor’s greasy ankles,” Ana said. He gritted his teeth. “Fine. Direction, then? North? West?”

Kay grunted. “Mostly north of here.”

“I insist on an equal division,” Boadella said.

“Outstanding,” Ana stabbed the map. “I see this crossroads here, to the north. Then it leads to these roads, two here, those three. Eight trucks of yours, two of yours, Boadella. Boadella, are those two on the ridge under your command?”

“Those are Republican units, yes.”

“Four of yours. Is everybody fueled up?” Ana asked. “No need to stop for gas.”

“All ready,” Kay said.

“Twelve trucks here, four once we get the weapons out.” An engine roared behind Ana, and one of Kay’s new trucks drove out. “Outstanding. Get the rest of them moving.”

“That truck’s beat up,” Shamus said. “Did somebody drive it into a wall or something?”

“Never trust a space pilot on the ground,” Ana said. “Here’s what we’re doing. Drive everyone down here.” He pointed at the map. “That area there. I see trees and then a field. Hide the trucks in the trees. Break them into eight groups of two. Split the weapons trucks up. Never have two of those together. Once the weapons are down there, mix all the trucks up, then send a group out every ninety seconds. Each group of two takes a different route. One here, one here, then two down here, then they split here. Then do it again, maybe send some down this far road here. But mix them up in the trees. Then the planes can’t tell which group has what, and they won’t be able to attack everybody. Something will get through. You two tell your troops which routes to take. Understood?”

“Your trucks look different than ours,” Shamus said. “The pilots can tell.”

“Your trucks now. Trucks you didn’t pay for, I might add,” Ana said. “But they look different to us because we’re standing next to them. From ten thousand feet, they look the same, and pilots aren’t too smart. They like to shoot things that move. If we get everyone moving at more or less at the same time, they’ll get confused. Probably slaughter the local cow herd instead.”

“Where will you be?” Kay asked.

“Mr. Boadella will tell us. We all go in the same truck, though. We aren’t split up.”

“You’re coming with me?” Boadella said, “But I thought—”

“But what if that one is hit?” Kay asked.

“Then we die a glorious death in the service of the Empire,” Ana said.

“You mean the revolution,” Boadella said.

“No. No, I do not,” Ana said. “I’m not part of your revolution. Or your defense. Whatever. We’re here for the money.”

Shamus pointed. “I’ll send my first two here and here. You,

Republics, send out the next two. Pick your route. Then we'll send two after you on these wide routes. Then your last one can follow ours, or whatever, and the last two I'll tell to go wherever they want."

"Which will have the weapons?" Boadella asked.

"Not important to you," Shamus said. "Kay?"

"Do it. Go," Kay said.

Shamus ran off and snapped out orders. The second of his trucks roared out of the container, and he waved it down the hill. Boadella ran back to his group as his first truck was scraping out of the container.

"Is that a tow hitch in that grill?" Kay asked. "Did you smash these trucks into each other on purpose?"

"Purpose implies planning," Ana said. "There were just a series of unfortunate accidents."

Aero engines roared from the south, and everybody scampered in disarray.

"Keep moving," Ana yelled. "Keep moving. We're safe for now. They won't shoot yet."

The sky darkened as two fighters roared overhead.

"What are those planes doing?" Kay asked. "How did you know they wouldn't shoot?"

"Calling their base for orders," Ana said. "This wasn't a planned operation. They're not sure if they're supposed to fire or not. And unless I miss my guess, Engineer just fired up an Imperial Beacon. An Imperial corvette is in orbit, and the last thing the provisional government of the sovereign planet of New Oregon wants is to blow up an Imperial-registered freighter with the Imperial navy watching. They won't take that well."

"You forget that this ship is stuffed full of weapons," Kay said.

"What weapons?" Ana said. "We were delivering coloring books for school kids, says so on the manifest. And as soon as we get to your base we can dump the rest."

"That one container can hang us," Kay said.

"They don't know that. They won't take the chance. In a few minutes, they'll see trucks racing off in all directions and figure, correctly, that our delivery is over, and they have to chase the vehicles. The ship is going to be fine. They'll get orders to go after the trucks. As soon as they do, Pilot will lift, and he'll get away in the confusion."

"That's a great plan," Kay said. "I knew there was a reason I hired you."

Scruggs and Dena ran up in skinsuits with camouflaged coveralls over them, heavy boots, carried big packs, rifles in hand. Scruggs had customized her coveralls by adding a shoulder patch with a stylized

spaceship motif. Dena had them fitted so that they showed off her figure better.

"What are you doing with a rifle, Nature Girl?" Ana said.

Dena handed him a pack. "It's Scruggs's rifle. She wouldn't let me touch yours."

Ana shouldered his pack with difficulty, his cast making him awkward. Scruggs handed him his rifle and a radio. "There were only two in your quarters, Centurion."

Ana waved the radio off. "I don't have enough hands. You and her keep a radio each. I'll communicate with everyone through you."

Boadella ran up and pointed at a truck. "Centurion, you and your party go with that one. I will be in another. The driver knows where to take you."

"Hopefully, the driver survives, then," Ana said.

Dirk ran partway down the ramp. "Lifting as soon as we have coordinates, Kay. We need directions."

Kay smiled. "This is a great plan. See you soon, Centurion." She leaned in and planted a big wet kiss on Ana's lips.

After five seconds, Ana responded and hugged her back. She disengaged and ran over to the ramp.

Scruggs's eyes widened, and Dena giggled. Ana racked his rifle. "If either of you ever mentions that to anybody *ever*, I will beat you to death with a shovel and then shoot your corpse. Move out." He ran to the waiting truck.

***

"Where are we going?" Lee asked, buckling into her chair.

"Wherever our new employer wants us to," Dirk said, running through the start-up sequence.

Kay arrived and strapped in at the back of the control room. She gave Lee a set of coordinates. Lee put them in the computer and traced a route.

"Those planes," Dirk said. "What type of weapons do they have?"

"You planning on shooting back? Aren't you unarmed?"

"We are. But I want to know what I have to avoid."

"They're Union of Nations light turbo-prop counter-insurgency planes," Kay said. "The export model. They're not fast for planes—maybe four hundred kilometers per hour at most. Crew of one. Their endurance is four hours. So, with us being a two-hour flight from their base, they weren't expected to be a problem. They won't be able to stay long."

"Weapons?" Dirk said, tapping green buttons on his console.

"Machine-gun with three hundred rounds. Four pylons can carry five hundred kilograms of ordnance. Unguided ordnance. Four one

hundred kilo bombs, four seventy-five kilo rockets, or four six packs of ten kilo rockets. All are visually guided."

"Sensors?"

"Radio frequency homing equipment, for landing at airports and guidance to a site. They can have a standard GPS package, but these ones don't have it because we don't have a full satellite constellation here. They can carry an infrared detection pod. But only one in ten will have that, and the pod is visible and affects stability in the air. Chances of one of these two having it is low. Bottom line, they have to see you to hit you."

"You sure of these statistics?" Dirk said.

"Positive."

"How do you know so much?"

"I bought them," Kay said. "For the government. They were supposed to be part of a package to defend us against insurgents."

"And now you're the insurgent," Dirk said.

"Life's funny that way."

"Engineer," Dirk said over the intercom. "We're ready up here."

"Spooling everything up now, Skipper," Gavin said. "All green here. I don't know if you've looked outside, but if we get any forward movement at all, we'll snag a container on takeoff. And those troops might still be out there."

"Lee?" Dirk asked.

Lee cycled through the working cameras. "Nothing I can see here, Pilot. Trucks are all gone. Port rear down is blank. I suppose somebody could be hiding there, but all the trucks are gone."

"Then, let's get out of here," Dirk said. "Where are those planes?"

"No idea," Lee said. "Our radar mount is mostly shadowed when we're down."

"Outstanding, as the centurion says. Lee, soon as we're up, I'm going fast as I can to beat them."

"We only need a half orbit," Lee said. "Our destination looks like an undeveloped and unpopulated area."

"It is," Kay said. "Lake up a river. We could use seaships to bring heavy things in. We've got a base there, covered with forest."

Dirk tapped his screen and fired the bow thrusters as hard as he could. The ship rocked, lifted slightly, then lifted higher, climbing to the vertical. Bunches of burnt grape vines blew in all directions, and debris from the landing pattered down from the broken screen monitor. Dirk waited till the ship was almost on its tail, then fired the main engines. The billowing clouds of grape vines ignited instantly. The ship lifted, clouds of dense gray smoke billowing from the engine's roar. The ship staggered for a second, then rolled to the right.

"What's happening?" Kay yelled as they tilted more.

“Stuck on a container,” Dirk said.

“We’ll roll into the ground.”

Dirk killed the bow thrusters. They rolled faster, tilting almost sideways. The bow dropped, and Dirk cut the main engines to idle.

“We’re going to power into the ground,” Kay said.

“Wait for it,” Dirk said.

The ship tilted forward, down, and right, then suddenly shuddered, and the stern jerked up.

“Dropped it. Hang on,” Dirk said. He fired the bow thrusters at full and pitched the ship up and simultaneously rolled left. A moment’s hesitation, then he fired the main engines again, and they lifted and powered away.

“Plane coming up behind us,” Lee said, pointing at the camera. A light flashed on the screen. “Missile launch.”

Light flared on the screen as the rockets accelerated after. The pursuing plane turned off to the side to avoid any potential explosion.

“Those rockets. What type of guidance do they have?” Dirk yelled.

“None. Straight in,” Kay yelled back.

Dirk instantly cut the main engine, and the Heart’s Desire dropped. He feathered the thruster controls, and the ship retained its bow up aspect.

Lee flipped through cameras, then caught a rocket flying past on a top camera and put it on her screens. “They went over us. Can they circle back?”

“No,” Kay said, “they don’t have any guidance—crap.”

Lee had switched to a forward-facing camera. Two rockets streamed ahead. The one on the left had veered right, like it was tracking them and turning to follow. The one on the right continued straight, but its brother tipped toward it and, a second later, blew up, engulfing both rockets in the explosion.

Dirk pulsed the main engines again, and Heart’s Desire surged forward. Metal fragments tinged the hull as they powered through the debris cloud.

“Lee, where’re those planes?”

Lee paged through her cameras. “Nothing here. They’ve turned away or split up or something. We look clear.”

“Suborbit, here we come. That rocket malfunctioned,” Dirk said. “Lucky for us.”

“Stupid Empire-damned Nats,” Kay said. “Cheap equipment. Rip-off artists.”

Dirk adjusted his board. “You sound upset. Did you want them to hit us?”

“Want them? No,” Kay said. “I’m fine with that. But it’s that rocket going off target that bothers me.”

“Why would that bother you?” Lee asked.

“When I was on the purchasing committee, I paid extra for those rockets. They’re the premier version. I feel ripped off.”

Dirk and Lee laughed. “Well, I’m glad that you’re such a lousy consumer then,” Dirk said.

“Hope I’m just as lousy with the other ones,” Kay said. “Any word on the trucks?”

Lee flicked her screen and brought up the radio link.

“Centurion, this is Heart’s Desire. Please respond.”

The radio was silent.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

“Where did you learn to drive?” Ana asked their driver, hanging onto the door frame.

Scruggs and Dena were jammed between him and their driver. Even with seatbelts fastened, they rocked from side to side.

Their driver had gunned the engine, spun the wheels, and skidded them out of the trees onto the road. Then he fishtailed back and forth along the road and yelled incomprehensible words.

“What language is that?” Dena asked.

“Spanish or some variety,” Ana said. He asked again, this time in halting but comprehensible Spanish words.

The driver responded at length, taking the first one and then the other hand off the wheel to gesture his response.

“Well?” Dena asked, after all the waving had stopped.

“His name is Manuel. He’d never driven a car before the revolution came to town, as he called it. He and his family were farmers before the... something. I don’t know that word. After the something, he walked five hundred miles to the city and got work in a factory. There, he met Boadella, and Boadella convinced him to join the revolution. Boadella understands things. Boadella will make the revolution happen. Boadella is great. Boadella gave him this car to drive, and he won’t let Boadella down. Boadella is the greatest mind of his generation.”

“He’s pretty big on Boadella,” Dena said.

“I think the key point, if I had to make a guess, is that Boadella can read and this guy can’t,” Ana said. “And I also think he doesn’t know how far a mile is because he said he walked five hundred of them in three days.”

“But what’s this about a revolution? I thought we were supporting the legitimate government of the planet?” Dena asked.

“There may be some disagreement on who that is,” Ana said. “This Boadella fellow thinks that he’s more legitimate than Kay’s group, but he also thinks they’re both more legitimate than the Nats. The enemy of my enemy is my friend.”

“Great history lesson, Manuel,” Scruggs said. “Thank you.” She smiled at him.

Manuel heard his name, glanced sideways, then clocked that it was an attractive young lady speaking to him, grinned back, and chattered back at her in Spanish.

“What’s he saying, Centurion?” Scruggs asked.

“I’m not fluent, but I think, after getting a look at you, he’s decided he likes you even more than Boadella. And he keeps repeating things along the lines of ‘What’s a nice girl like you doing in a place like this?’”

“What did you tell him?”

“I told him you wanted to learn Spanish and to hear about the revolution. He’s offered to teach you both.”

“Do you think he can teach me Spanish, Centurion?”

“He’s a good-looking boy. He can teach you all sorts of things,” Dena said. Scruggs thumped her arm. “What? I meant conjugations and things like that. But that’s a good question. Scruggs, why are you here?”

“Adventure,” Scruggs said.

“You might get killed.”

“I’d rather die than never do anything.”

“There’re worse things than dying, as you’ll find out,” Ana said.

“What are you doing here, then, Dena?” Scruggs asked.

“I’m running away from my problems,” Dena said.

The truck screamed around a turn, rolled up on one set of wheels, and then thumped back down. Yells came from the squad in the back of the truck. Manuel yelled back at them, swinging them from side to side.

“But perhaps,” Dena said, “I could have run a little less far. What about you, Centurion?”

“This is what I do,” Ana said.

The squad in the back yelled, and one poked his head through the connecting window and yelled at Manuel.

Manuel yelled back.

Ana reached with his good hand, grasped the man by the face, and pushed back. “Disparar. Disparar.”

“Centurion?”

“I’m telling them to shoot at the plane behind us.”

Manuel tromped the gas pedal to the floor, and the truck surged ahead for a moment, then slowed as the engine reached maximum revs. The soldiers in the back fired at the approaching plane. Then a rat-a-tat-tat and bullets puffed up dust to the left of the truck. A propeller zoomed overhead and banked away to line up for another turn.

Ana climbed onto the dash for a better view, cursing as his broken wrist held him up. “Light counter-insurgency plane. Machine-gun and underwing rockets. Look like rocket pods—groups of six or eight small ones. Spread out but short range.”

Manuel yelled, and Ana yelled back. The road turned, and they

banked out of the scrub forest they had been in, turned a gentle corner, and met up with another road, this one running due north. A river ran close to one side. An orchard of apple trees lined the other side. They were hemmed in with no place to go except forward.

The plane executed a gentle turn in the distance, rolled back, and lined up on the main road, heading at them on a collision course, the rocket pods under each wing glinting silver in the setting sun.

***

"That river ahead," Kay said. "Follow it up from the ocean. It widens into a lake, and there's a base on the shore next to it."

Dirk tilted the controls, and the Heart's Desire cruised along the river. "Big river. Why is there nobody living up here?"

"Axial tilt. This is summer. It's frozen, with two meters of snow in the winter and it's permafrost farther upriver. During the spring melt, the river's choked with ice, and we can't get in or out. But it's a great place to store things. There's plenty of rock outcroppings. We blasted out a big cavern to put things in."

"Be easy to find with thermals," Lee said.

"Good thing there's not that many planes on this planet, and even fewer with thermal sensors."

"But still, a ship in orbit should find it. Just from the residual heat alone."

"See those?" Kay pointed.

A herd of animals forded the river below.

"Cows," Dirk said. "With horns."

"Reindeer. And they're not horns, they're antlers. Warm-blooded mammals, to be exact. There are millions of them. Unless you do a particular survey and check all of it, those herds mess up all your scans. So, we're safe here."

"Do we get a landing beacon?" Dirk asked.

"No. Every ship in orbit would hear that," Kay said. "As you pass that reverse bend there, turn due west for exactly seventeen kilometers, and you'll see a rock shelf between the river and a bunch of rock hills. Drop there."

Dirk hit the loop, banked west, and Lee started a counter on her screen.

"What's the latest on our friends?" Dirk asked.

"All the trucks got away. It will be tonight before they're in a safe place where they can call in. But I haven't heard anything yet."

Dirk nodded. "You said 'we.' We blasted it out."

"Some friends of mine. We had an inkling before the last election that something was going to happen. The SoDems looked to be losing, and they weren't too keen on us being in charge."

“I thought you all supported democracy out here,” Dirk said. “Why would anybody be worried about you?”

“It wasn’t us so much, it was our coalition partners, the Republicans. Remember, they got Confed funding, and they have some strange ideas.”

“What type of strange ideas?”

“Generous stipends for the unemployed. Free healthcare and education. Subsidized vacations.”

“That’s what we have in the Empire,” Dirk said. “Except for the free vacations.”

“Interesting that you still say ‘we,’” Kay said.

“Bad habit. I’ll fix it. But what’s wrong with those?”

“Nothing. But the SoDems were less happy with the other ideas, jail for all members of the ‘ruling class,’ as they call them, suppression of all religions. Oh, and complete nationalization of all private property.”

“Oops,” Dirk said. “That probably rattled a few feathers.”

“Ten seconds,” Lee said. “I think I see your spot. Looks like caverns under those bluffs.”

“Land as close as you can to them,” Kay said. “We’ll put camouflage netting over you or drag under the rock if we can.”

Dirk reduced speed. “I see it. So, what happened next?”

“After the elections, when those Republican idiots declared they were moving ahead with their program, there was some unrest.”

“Some unrest?”

“Their militia burned a bunch of churches and beat up the priests.”

“That’s bad,” Dirk said. “Hold tight.” Heart’s Desire slowed and edged up to the bluff. Dirk waited till he was less than fifty feet away, killed his main drive, and pivoted away from the bluffs and would have an easy take off path up the river.

“Nice landing, Pilot,” Lee said.”

“First time you’ve ever said that,” Dirk said. He tapped shutdown sequences on his screen. “What happened after the priests?”

“The Republicans seized a shoe factory,” Kay said, unbuckling her harness. “A shoe factory, of all things. The locals protested, rioted, shot the police. Then a volunteer group of SoDem Militia came in to support the local people, more Republican militias mobilized, the SoDems mobilized more in return. Then the army and the customs forces split. There was general confusion, and here we are. The SoDems hold half the planet, including the capital and the spaceport. We’re strong in the countryside and the farming areas. The Republicans have a lot of support in the larger cities, anywhere where they could set up unions.”

Dirk unbuckled and led the way back to the hab unit, then proceeded down the ramp behind it. Lee and Kay followed. Dirk

tromped down the ramp. The cold wind made him shiver. “What’s the status now?”

“We’re losing,” Kay said. “We launch an attack somewhere, they repulse it. They launch an attack. We give ground. Repeat. And every day, hundreds of people die.”

“All these people are dying because of a shoe factory?”

“Yep.” Kay looked at the river rushing by. “And they weren’t even very good shoes.”

Chapter Twenty-Eight

The attack plane lined up on the dirt road. Scruggs, Dena, Ana, and Manuel, the driver, saw the spinning propeller pointed directly at them. A dense forest spun by on the left, the trees as solid as a fifty-foot tall picket fence. A wide river meandered to their right—at the bottom of a steep six-foot drop. Fishing shacks lined the road's edge, with steps down to floating docks at the bottom, where small skiffs were tied up. Some shacks had stalls with signs advertising the day's catch, others garages where trucks could pick up directly from the boats.

Manuel yelled into the back and stamped the accelerator down. His knuckles whitened as he gripped the wheel, and he muttered to himself.

"Why's he going faster?" Dena yelled.

"One action guy, our Manuel," Ana said.

"Tell him to slow down."

Ana raised an eyebrow. "Why? To give the plane a longer time to shoot at us?"

The plane corrected, and the machine-gun stuttered. The line of bullets raced down the road, then veered off to the right, and the trees exploded in bits as he roared over.

"The Emperor's testicles," Dena yelled.

Manuel started repeating four words.

"Didn't account for the drift when he took his hands off the controls," Ana said. "I'll bet the gun switch is separate on that model. He used one hand to press the fire button, and the other overcompensated and pushed him right. Rookie mistake."

"We're getting shot at with a cannon, and you're talking about switch ergonomics?" Dena asked.

"That's a big word. Where'd you learn that?"

"I went to school," Dena said. "Stop talking about switches and get us out of here."

"Out to where?" Ana asked. "We're stuck on this road with a guy we can't even talk to, and—look out!"

A bicycle-like contraption pulled out of one of the garages up ahead. A red-haired man pedaled out onto the road and turned away from them. A two-wheeled cart full of squirming silver fish dragged behind him. He was not more than a hundred meters ahead, and the truck would overrun him in seconds.

Manuel clenched the steering wheel and kept the accelerator pushed down. He was repeating four words over and over. They sped along the road, the cart centered in the windshield.

"Swerve," Ana yelled. "Swerve, you maggot."

Manuel didn't move.

Ana punched him in the shoulder. Manuel blinked but kept muttering his four words.

"Swerve, dammit," Ana yelled, hitting him again. "Now, now."

The cart loomed in the windshield.

Scruggs reached over and slammed the horn repeatedly. It blared a Klaxon sound.

The red-headed fisherman on the bike glanced over his shoulder and saw death careening behind him. He gaped and lost his rhythm, which saved his life. His feet tangled in the pedals, and he tripped over the bike and down the hill to the river. The cart turned to follow.

Manuel hit it at full speed, and the cart exploded, sending a shower of fish guts, wood, and wheels in all directions. Guts smeared the window, and a wheel cracked the driver's side. A single intact fish flipped up onto their hood and blew back till it hit the truck and stuck on the passenger side.

Manuel didn't otherwise react but kept talking.

"What's he saying?" Dena asked. "Why does he keep repeating that?" What are those words?"

They all listened.

Ana nodded. "I got it. It's a prayer. He's saying a rosary."

"That's a big fish," Scruggs said. "You know fish, Dena. What type is it?"

Dena turned wide eyes on Scruggs. "We're going to be killed by a crazy religious fanatic driver, and you want to know what type of fish it is?"

Ana leaned over. "Are you scared, Scruggs? Afraid of dying."

"Well, I know I should be. But, no, no, I'm not."

"I'm scared," Dena said. "I'm scared enough for both of us. All three of us, in fact."

Manuel kept praying.

"Our driver is scared enough for all of us," Ana said. "Scruggs, that's not healthy, not being scared."

"It's not? But you're not scared."

"Oh, yes, I am," Ana said. "But I'm better at hiding it."

One of the troops in the back poked their head through and yelled.

Ana pushed him back. "Not now, buddy. We need to find out where that plane is now and whether it's coming back."

Rifles cracked in the back. A burst of bullets stitched up the trees to their left.

“Found him,” Ana said. “He’s learning. He’s trying to compensate for the drift. He fired one shot to get his aim point. The next one, he’ll fire and then the right drift will swing him on target.”

The machine-gun chattered again, and a single bullet pinged through the roof and cracked in the dashboard.

The machine-gun stopped. The rifles continued banging from the rear.

“Look.” Dena pointed. The pursing plane appeared off their right window, matching the truck’s speed and paralleled them. A helmeted pilot peered sideways at them.

Ana waved at the pilot and whipped a thumbs-up. The pilot returned the wave, then pointed his finger and thumb like a pistol and made shooting motions at them, then sped away, banking off to the right.

“What was that about?” Scruggs said. “Why didn’t he shoot us?”

“Out of ammo for the nose gun, if I had to guess,” Ana said. “He hasn’t had enough training before. He didn’t know how to set up correctly. Now he knows how to lead us, and he’s out of ammunition. Must be frustrating to him.”

“Never mind his frustration,” Dena said. “Why didn’t our glorious revolutionaries back there shoot him down?”

“Because they’re scared, panicked, and they’re lousy shots to start with,” Ana said. “They also need more training.”

“Eight of them can’t shoot a plane a hundred meters away?” Dena said.

“This war thing is harder than you think,” Ana said. “Takes practice.”

“We’re getting some practice now,” Scruggs said.

“Indeed,” Ana said. “Here he comes again. He’s trying another shot.”

“You said that he’s out of ammunition,” Dena said.

“I did. For his nose gun. See those square boxes under his wings?”

“Yes.”

“Rockets. Small ones, probably all fire in volley. He’ll get us in a cockpit sight, line us up, then fire one of them.”

“Think he’s that smart?”

“Nope. He’s excited, too. Probably his first chance to shoot things. We need to make it harder for him. Now, Manuel, my good friend...” Ana spoke slowly in halting Spanish.

“Centurion,” Scruggs said, “he’s starting his attack run.”

The plane lined the road again and was heading for them. Shots rang out from the rear, then there was a yell, a scream, and a thump.

“What was that?” Dena said.

“Somebody jumped,” Ana said. “Bad idea at this speed.”

“Better than getting blown up,” Dena said.

“Not going to happen. I have a plan for that.” Ana slapped Manuel’s shoulder and spoke in Spanish again.

Manuel paid him attention this time, but it was all negative. He kept saying ‘non’ and shaking his head. Ana’s voice rose. So did Manuel’s.

“Centurion, he’s getting closer.”

Ana started screaming at Manuel.

Manuel screamed back. “Non. Non. Non.”

The plane loomed in the windshield. They could make out the pilot through the propeller. He was grinning.

Ana slapped at Manuel. Manuel shrugged him off. Ana fumbled with his left hand and pulled his revolver up.

The attack plane fired the rockets. They saw the bright burn of the ignition for a fraction of a second, then twenty-four missiles blasted out, aimed for the road in front of them. They were going to drive right into the explosions.

Ana fired six shots from his revolver past Manuel’s right ear. The cab rocked with the violence of the booms and filled with some. One round jerked the steering wheel and blew the windshield out. The others flew past.

Manuel screamed louder than he had ever before and stood on the brakes. The truck fishtailed from side to side, then skidded to a halt in a cloud of dust. They were all thrown against their seatbelts and jammed up against the dashboard. The road ahead exploded in a flash and a boom, and rocks and dirt showered in through the smashed windshield. Clouds of dark brown dust billowed up.

“Everybody out,” Ana yelled, kicking the door open, unbuckling his seat belt, then falling out the side.

He landed on his damaged wrist, grunted, and rolled down and away from the truck. Scruggs and Dena followed. Manuel disappeared into the gloom. The troops in the back piled out and staggered around.

“On me, on me,” Ana yelled and stumbled to the right. He missed the top of the hill and fell and rolled down to the bottom, splashing into the water. Scruggs, Dena, and most of the troops followed, skidding down the hill and landing in the mud.

“Count off,” Ana yelled. “Scruggs? Dena? Status?”

“Here, Centurion.”

“I’m fine, old man.”

Ana found the sergeant from the back and shook him, then counted one, two, three in Spanish, till the sergeant got the idea and yelled out commands. Voices answered from the dust, and other figures skidded down the hill.

“Siete,” the sergeant said.

“Ocho?” Ana said, holding up eight fingers.

The sergeant flicked one of Ana’s fingers down. “Siete.”

“Got it,” Ana said.

The sergeant frowned, counted his men again, then yelled, “Manuel?”

Manuel’s voice came out of the dust, and he slipped over the edge and rolled into the river with the rest of them.

“Outstanding,” Ana said. “Up top and see what happened.”

He climbed the riverbank, followed by the whole crowd. Their truck sat in the middle of the road, smeared with dust, engine running, doors open, windshield smashed but otherwise in apparent running order. A crater ran from side to side of the road where the rockets had impacted. It was wide but not more than two feet deep.

A bird chirped in the silence. The sky was empty.

Ana gave a careful three-sixty of the area, looking at the sky and cupping his ear. “Outstanding,” Ana said. “He saw the bang, but he was short of fuel or got called off. Right, see those deadfall trees over there? There’s a shovel in the truck. Scruggs, get the shovel and start digging—we’ll get a couple guys to help you. Dena, you’re the woods girl. Find me some fallen trees small enough for six men to lift but big enough that we can fill that crater—”

Ana was still talking when the leading truck from the next group roared out of the dust cloud and crashed into theirs.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

"You want us to do what?" Dirk asked.

"Transport us to the site of an operation," Kay said. "We have some ideas that we want to try out, and having air support opens up a lot of possibilities."

Dirk, Kay, and Lee stood at the bottom of the ramp, examining their surroundings. The river swept in a wide curve around a rocky shore. Their side was bare rock, leading up to a crumbling cliff ahead. A thick pine forest covered the far side of the river. The water was green, and sandbanks shielded bends in both directions.

"There's that 'we' again," Dirk said. "And you hired us as trainers, not as transport. We're a freighter, not a squadron of attack shuttles."

"It's a reasonable request," Kay said. "What, you think I was going to have you train our people to be starship pilots? The great space navy of New Oregon."

"No, we won't do it," Dirk said.

"Do what?" Gavin said, arriving from the engine room. "What won't we do?"

"Transport their troops into some sort of combat," Dirk said. "We're not getting involved."

"You just delivered tons of weapons, and you're not getting involved? You told the Republicans that you were sent by the Empire to assist them."

"I didn't say that."

"But you let them think that," Kay said.

"I can't control what people think," Dirk said.

"What did you think we wanted all these weapons for?" Kay asked. "Hang out in the woods and do target practice? We've been planning to launch a major operation, one that will decide the future of this war. This chewed up most of our resources and favors getting weapons here. We had to bribe people to arrange to have those weapons sitting in that depot. We bribed people at the trucking company to have those trucks ready. Special trucks just for you."

"About those trucks—" Gavin said.

"Later, Engineer, later," Dirk said. "Fine, you bribed some people, cashed in some favors, and got truckloads of weapons. The weapons are here, and we'll play your game of training people."

"Not just weapons. Plenty of weapons. Enough to arm hundreds of troops. We can't stand up against the SoDems for set-piece battles.

Originally, we were going to infiltrate our troops in for it but having a starship means we can drop on site."

"You don't have a starship," Dirk said. "You have a crew who will teach people useful things. The starship stays here."

"Teach them after we refuel and unload," Gavin said. He stamped on the rock. "I need some help getting the hoses into that river, and I've got to get that Empire-damned container loose from the chains. And there was some talk about camouflage."

"We've got a small crew up here," Kay said. "We can help. Let's get things sorted out first."

Eons past the river had undercut the bank, before sliding away, leaving overhangs that sheltered caves. The inside of some of the caves had been blasted away, and the rock waste had been bulldozed out into the river. Closer inspection revealed empty concrete pads surrounded by crushed rock. Connections for portable buildings ran into the ground. This had been a major site of some sort, now abandoned.

The overhangs were packed with sealed shipping containers stuffed underneath, and one of the main caves had a vehicle sized garage door. A group of a dozen people came out of a regular door set next to it. All wore green military-style camouflage that matched the trees.

Dirk watched them come. "A secret military base in the northern wilderness. Centurion would be jealous."

"Originally, it was a transshipment point for gold mining exploration."

"Did they find gold?" Dirk asked.

"Lots. Lots and lots of gold," Kay said. "But enough to make it economically feasible to mine this far north? Nope. So, they abandoned this staging point here. There used to be prefab housing and power generation on those pads. The mining company pulled out all the buildings when they left. We took it over, expanded the storage area by blowing out the rocks."

"Which won't be noticeable on a satellite because there was construction here before," Dirk said. "As long as new buildings don't pop up, even a close look at this area just shows debris from the old site."

"Got it in one, Loverboy," Kay said. "And we dumped the extra rock in the river—first flood season, it got covered with mud and looks like natural changes in the river." Kay stopped and addressed her crew.

They broke into groups, one dragging a hose under Gavin's direction, four draping camouflage netting on long poles over the Heart's Desire.

"The transport for the rest of those weapons can be here the day after tomorrow if I call them. Can you get that container lowered by

then?"

"With some luck," Gavin said.

"I'd normally use skill," Kay said. "But you do whatever is best for you. I have to make some calls, arrange to meet some people. Why don't you three take the next day off? Sleep in. Leisurely breakfast. Go for a swim. I'm sure you all need a break after that landing. I certainly do."

"What about Centurion and the others?" Lee said. "And all your weapons?"

"We'll know tonight, tomorrow morning at the latest. But I'm sure they are fine."

***

"No, I am not fine," Dena said, using her hands to climb up the muddy trail. "I'm tired, hungry, grumpy, and angry." She glanced at the young recruit climbing up the hill in front of her. His rear end was eye level to her. "Also, horny. All these fine young men. Hey, old man, will you teach me some Spanish?"

"I'm busy," Ana said from the front of the line. "Learn your own Spanish."

"Use your comm," Scruggs said. "It's got all sorts of language programs on it."

"The words I want aren't in a standard program," Dena said. "But first chance I get, I'll look into it. This pack is heavy."

The collision had wrecked both trucks, so they had stripped them of anything useful and headed off into the woods. They were in Federalist-held territory, or at least Federalist-leaning, so they should have been safe to travel openly.

But after a long discussion, Ana had pointed out that, after the attack aircraft pilot's report, the SoDems were sure to send a column from the nearest big city, just to find out what was in the trucks. And finding Imperial citizens next to a supposed arms shipment would be awkward for everybody. Getting as far away from the wrecks as possible seemed like a good idea.

The Republican sergeant had agreed and managed to get Boadella on the radio and, in a rapid conversation, had arranged a coded rendezvous in two days. Ana organized the stripping of the vehicles and had the squads roll the two trucks into the river. They followed the sergeant into the forest and over a range of hills.

"Well, you're the one who packed it back on the ship," Scruggs said, using a tree trunk to propel her up the trail.

"And it's lucky we just have to carry what we brought with us and didn't have a truckload of weapons to carry as well," Ana said. "Cases of ammunition are heavy."

“Don’t I know it,” Dena said. “That’s what got us into this mess in the first place, Centurion getting us stuck in the river because the trucks were overloaded.”

“I did not get us stuck in the river,” Ana said. “And the trucks were not overloaded.” The trail flattened, then dropped. “Looks like we’re over this ridge. Sergeant, stop the platoon and have everybody rest for fifteen minutes.”

The Republican sergeant spoke a little English, but he looked at Ana’s gesture and yelled out orders. The group sank to the ground, panting.

“How come he does what you tell him?” Dena asked.

Ana opened a water bottle with his left hand and drank. His right was still in the cast. “I act like I’m in charge, so he assumes I know what I’m doing. That’s a lesson for you ladies. Act like you know what’s going on, and people will believe it.”

“He doesn’t even understand what you are saying,” Dena said.

“No need,” Ana said. “Stopping for a break on top of a hill while under cover is a logical thing to do. So, when he hears me shouting, he assumes that we’re going to do the normal thing.”

Ana fished in his pocket, produced a pill bottle, and swallowed one. “Very predictable. Communication isn’t that hard if you have some idea what the other person wants.”

“You think so?” Scruggs asked. “I’m not sure we can do it so well.”

“Watch Nature Girl there,” Ana said. “She doesn’t speak a word of Spanish, but I think she’ll be able to communicate with these boys just fine and get what she wants.”

Dena stuck her tongue out at Ana, then grinned at two men across the trail who were sharing a water bottle. They grinned back, and one offered the water bottle to her.

Dena stood. “You want in on this, Scruggs?”

“In on what?”

“Practicing my Spanish. Making new friends. Maybe some of that training that Centurion says we’re getting paid for.”

“Maybe later,” Scruggs said.

“Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do,” Ana said.

“Like what? Stab them in their sleep? Shoot them all in the head?” Dena asked.

“I’d do all of those, no problem,” Ana said. He waved her off. “Just have fun and don’t cause me any problems.”

“I’m going to cause other people problems,” Dena said, sashaying over to the two men.

Scruggs watched her go. “Centurion, is this a good idea?”

“Absolutely not.” Ana extended the bottle to her. “Water?”

“Yes, please, Centurion.” Scruggs drank. “Why didn’t you stop her?”

“How? Shoot her? The three of us have to stick together here. She won’t listen to me anyway, so the sooner she makes it clear who her new friend is, that’s one less problem I’ll have to deal with.”

Scruggs looked around the clearing. “How long do we have to hike like this?”

“Getting tired, Private? Want a little break, maybe a bubble bath?”

“No, Centurion. I’m just curious where we’re going.”

“If I understand what they said, we’ve got another day of hiking, then we’ll be at a Republican camp in the woods somewhere, and we’ll be able to contact Navy and the others. And get started on our training.”

“This isn’t working out the way I expected,” Scruggs said.

“It never does,” Ana said.

“Dena and I have those planetary radios you gave us.”

“Let’s keep those a secret for now,” Ana said. “We’re not in any danger at this point, and there’s nothing to be gained by letting these folks know we can call our own starship in right now. Let’s see how things pan out.”

“Do you trust these people, Centurion?”

“Not really but then again, I don’t trust anyone. But I will say I trust them even less than I normally would.”

Scruggs watched Dena flirt with the men. “I don’t trust them at all.”

“You’re learning,” Ana said. He stood. “Sergeant! Break’s over. Off to the camp.”

Chapter Thirty

It took three days for the weapons transport to arrive. Dirk, Gavin, and Lee fueled up the Heart's Desire and took long naps. Dirk insisted on manning the control room to watch the boards and to lock the ship up while they were sleeping. After sleeping for two shifts, it took Gavin two more to fix the chains and magnets and jack the jammed container down to the ground. Once it was down on the rock, he blew all the air out of the ship, purged the backup tanks, and reloaded with fresh atmosphere from New Oregon.

Everybody waited outside while the fans blew fresh air into the ship.

"There," Gavin said. "Now we'll smell like pine trees for a few weeks."

"A few days," Lee said. "Remember the pilot's feet."

"He needs to have a swim," Gavin said. "The cold water will cure them."

Dirk waved at the river. "See that white thing, bobbing along?"

"That's, what, an iceberg?"

"River ice," Dirk said. "Kay says the source of this river is a big glacier and parts of it break off and float down river. We're hundreds of miles away. Imagine how cold it must be to keep ice frozen that long."

"I get your point," Gavin said. "How they'll get that container loaded up."

"Kay said it's going to another base somewhere, for distribution to the shock troops or some such thing."

"We've been here three days, and she hasn't asked us to do anything. Just sit here."

"She's been in meetings a lot," Dirk said. "They're arranging something big. Something that all those weapons are needed for."

A horn sounded, and a barge appeared from the downriver bend. Then another, then a third. The barge-train pivoted around the bend, a tugboat pushing it.

"Clever idea," Gavin said. "One towboat, many barges. The first two barges are standard shipping containers, but what's that on the third?"

"Looks like wood," Dirk said. "Probably a steam engine, wood burning. Could use coal, I suppose, but no shortage of wood in this area."

“Strange colony,” Gavin said. “Airplanes, then steam engines.”

“Colonies do what they can with what they have,” Dirk said. “It’s expensive to import advanced technology. Or even non-advanced technology.”

“Well, let’s see how they get that container onboard,” Gavin said.

The barge-train steamed up till it was abreast the camp, across from the Heart’s Desire. An anchor rattled out and splashed into the water. The barges drifted back and strained on the cable but held. Crewmen used a crank to haul a bow frame to the vertical, then flip it down. It resolved into a ramp, folded into sections. Other crewman used hand cranks to flip it out piece by piece, and, shortly, the ramp extended fifty feet from the barge’s side, dragging in the river and thumping sturdily into the rocky shore. The crew unchained a tarpaulin-shrouded item on the bow, an electric forklift with four tines and big tires specifically designed to pick up shipping containers.

It was the work of five minutes for the forklift to roll off the barge, down the ramp, onto the rock ledge, and past the ship.

The driver reversed and shuttled back and forth, then got his tines under the container of weapons, picked it up, raised it five feet, and trundled it back onto the barge.

“Well, that was anticlimactic,” Dirk said.

“I have got to get me one of those,” Gavin said. “Put it in the lowest container, have it drive out. We could sling containers like a greased tabbo. Could we fit it in the hold? If I got one that could drive down the ramp, we’d cut our loading and unloading time by ninety percent.”

“You do remember we’re smugglers and thieves, right?” Dirk said. “We don’t spend a lot of time on regular cargo operations.”

“We’re mercenaries now,” Lee said. “Working in a war for pay.”

“We’re just training people,” Dirk said. “Not fighting.”

The forklift dropped the new container onto a pile of others on the barge. Just another ordinary shipping order, not a load of guns.

The tugboat deployed a motorboat, and it roared up to the shore.

Kay appeared by the two men. “Let’s go greet our new guest.”

“Guest?” Dirk asked.

Kay ignored him and walked to the river.

The other three followed. Gavin caught a thrown rope and tied it to a fallen tree. A uniformed woman stepped out of the boat and splashed to shore. She was Kay’s height, with darker hair and had similar features, who carried a bulging briefcase.

“Pilot Friedel, Engineer...” Kay glanced at Gavin. “Engineer...”

“Crewjacki,” Gavin said. “Engineer Two, if we’re being formal. And this is Navigator One, Lee Michaelson.”

“Is this the Imperial officer you promised me, Kay?” the newcomer

said, pointing at Dirk.

"I'm just a pilot," Dirk said. "And who says I'm an Imperial officer?"

"Your accent, for one thing," the newcomer said. "That and your haughty, condescending manner. Smug, superior, and oh so posh. That's the Empire for you."

Gavin chuckled. "He is kind of superior, most of the time. Pleased to meet you... I don't understand your insignia, but I'm guessing general?"

"Colonel," she said. "For now." She glanced at the Heart's Desire. "That's a well-camouflaged starship. I don't know ship types. But would that be the Imperial-registered tramp freighter that ran the blockade and shot down an attack plane three days ago?"

Dirk, Lee, and Gavin exchanged glances.

"Shot down an attack plane?" Dirk asked.

"He was shot down during an operation against rebels. His wingman reported the presence of an armed Imperial navy ship during the fighting."

"We're not armed," Dirk said. "And we're certainly not a navy ship."

"That's what the report said."

"You sure he was shot down?" Gavin said. "Could he have crashed by accident? Or run out of fuel on the way home?"

"He's the nephew of a senior politician. They don't crash by accident. They are gravely wounded when they engage the enemy in glorious battle. Or, in this case, eject from their plane when combat damage renders it unflyable, even after his gallant attempt to overcome his injuries and fly it home."

Gavin grimaced. "He miscalculated his fuel, ejected, and let the plane crash. Did he hurt his knee parachuting down?"

"It was his ankle, but I'm sure that's not what he's telling the girls right now. He has an impressive-looking cast and a crutch as well."

"This is exciting and all," Dirk said. "But you said fighting the rebels. Aren't the SoDems the rebels? And I'm not familiar with your uniform."

"No reason you would be."

"Does the colonel have a name?" Gavin asked.

"Katherine, same as your friend here. She goes by Kay. I use my middle name—Mirari. Or Mira. Or Colonel, if you prefer."

Dirk crossed his arms. "Odd coincidence that you have the same name as our customer."

"Not when you consider that this is a nominally Catholic colony. Katherine was a Catholic saint and martyr, and we're both named after our grandmother's mother. And since our grandmothers were

sisters, that would be the same name."

"Fascinating," Dirk said.

"Aren't you going to welcome me here?"

"Since I'm not the host, your second or third or whatever cousin should be doing that."

"Welcome, and let's go inside," Kay said.

The four trooped up to the cliff. Dirk and the others had been given a brief tour two days ago. The building was made of garages, offices, bunk rooms, communal bathrooms, and showers. Their ship was more comfortable, so they had stayed there.

They walked through a garage full of tractors and entered an office on the far side. Kay locked the door, produced a bottle of wine and glasses from a cupboard, and poured them a drink.

Mira toasted them. "Quite the facility you've got here, Kay, well done. I never would have guessed it was here. Even in town, there were no real rumors. A few questions but nothing substantial."

"Why would there be rumors?" Lee asked. "And what town?"

"You're a Jovian. What are the Emperor's storm troopers doing on New Oregon?"

"I'm not—I'm the navigator of this ship. It's a private venture. Nothing more."

"You don't represent the Empire?"

"No."

"So you say." Mira sipped and looked at Dirk. "You, neither, Duke Friedel."

"I'm the pilot. Call me Pilot, not Duke. Neither of us is here on behalf of the Empire. We're purely here for our own reasons."

"Of course you are. Of course you are," Mira said. "An Imperial duke, a Jovian, a shipload of weapons, nothing to see here. Move along."

Dirk swirled his wine. "Why are you here? Why are we in this meeting? And why are you in uniform? I thought you were trying to hide."

"Mira here is on leave for a few days to visit her family," Kay said. "Attending a christening. She went directly from work, caught a train, then a ferry, to get home. Military members in uniform get free transit, so it's normal to see uniformed members on board. Her hometown happens to be where our supply tug is based. She got off the ferry, jumped on board the tug. And here she is."

"In uniform?" Dirk asked.

"It's normal to see uniforms around town," Mira said. "And I'm supposed to have my own clothes back at my house, so it would look strange me carrying any. I just had this briefcase when I went to catch the train."

"What's in the briefcase?" Gavin asked.

"Do you trust these people, Kay?" Mira asked her pseudo-cousin.

"They're Imperials, so they have their own agenda, but for now, it aligns with ours. I'll take any help they offer. And they do have a starship. An Imperial-registered starship. Who's going to shoot down an Imperial starship and start a war with the Empire?"

"Not me," Mira said. She clicked open her briefcase and handed out papers. "Kay said she had acquired a specialist in orbital to ground assault. An Imperial officer fits that description. Were you a shuttle pilot?"

"Assault Shuttle Detachment Commander," Dirk said. "Not that it matters."

"Paper?" Gavin said, waving the document. "Not electronics?"

"You three haven't spent a lot of time on the primitive colonies, have you?"

"Much more than we'd have liked," Dirk said, flipping through the papers.

"There's the arrogance and smugness again," Mira said. "They must teach it at your academy."

"I think so, too," Gavin said. "It's almost instinctive with him. He doesn't even realize he's doing it."

"The pilot has a command presence," Lee said. "As is appropriate for our leader."

"And now his lackey backs him up. You sound like Imperial spies trying to be somebody else. Except you." Mira pointed at Gavin. "You're different."

"Engineers can't afford to be arrogant," Gavin said. "And I wasn't in the navy."

"Traces of an Imperial accent, though," Mira said.

"Just lots of exposure to Imperials. I'm not from the Empire," Gavin said.

"Where are you from?"

"Somewhere else," Gavin said. He held up a paper. "This paper has the plans for a spaceport on it. I recognize this page. It's a container farm for storage of inbound and outbound cargo. Set up for a colony with customs controls. These here are marshaling yards for different companies. They sell space in outbound containers by the cubic yard and keep them here till they can load a whole one." He tapped the paper. "This here at the end is the ready-load yard, customs yard. Once a ship's inbound, they shift all the outbound containers into customs control. A ship lands. They send all their containers into the customs yards and load the ones that the customs yard says to load. Then they take off, and if you're on-planet and you want your inbound cargo, you have to deal with the customs people first."

“You’ve done this before,” Mira said.

“Lots of times. But you don’t need a smuggler for this. This is regular transport stuff. Nothing underhanded here.”

“If this is a spaceport, that would make this a fueling garage here, and this is a maintenance shop of some sort,” Dirk said. “What’s this long thing over here?”

“That’s a runway for aircraft,” Mira said. “There are… several dozen private aircraft on the planet. Transports, passenger craft. A surprising number of pontoon planes for transport to mining camps and the backwoods.”

“And military planes?” Dirk asked.

“A squadron of sixteen of those attack planes, one of which you shot down. And a transport squadron. Those are their maintenance warehouses there.”

“Our ship is unarmed, as I mentioned—repeatedly, in case you missed it the first time,” Dirk said. “We can’t shoot anything down.”

“Those planes allow the capital to strike out into our controlled areas at will, and we have no reliable counter,” Kay said. “It’s demoralizing. We get some sort of local success, and the next thing you know, our convoys are shot up, and our troops run away. We’re fine in the woods, but whenever we get into open country, we’re stuck.”

“Get some surface-to-air missiles, then,” Dirk said. “Shoot down a few planes, and the rest will stay away.”

“Not in the budget,” Kay said. “Even if we could find somebody to sell them to us.”

“You’re buying weapons from the Confeds. They have SAMs,” Dirk said.

“And they won’t sell them to us because they could be used later to shoot down Confed planes. All we can get is small arms. Which you brought here.”

“I don’t see what we’re involved in, here,” Dirk said. “You’ve got a bunch of small arms for your troops, who are unreliable, so you say. And any attacks that you make that get you closer to the city will be repulsed unless you shoot down those planes, which you can’t because you don’t have the right weapons. All we have is an unarmed freighter. What do you want us to do? And—” Dirk said. “Where did you get these? These should be secret plans, if they show the location of military units?”

“Got ’em out of my office safe, where I keep all my copies,” Mira said.

“Your safe?” Gavin raised his eyebrows. “Where you keep your copies. And you’ve been walking the countryside with your uniform on for a couple of days and nothing’s happened. And we don’t

recognize your uniform. But it doesn't look like anything that Kay or her friends here have been wearing."

"It's not."

"Who are you?"

Mira stuck out her hand. "Katherine Mirari Escobar-Sanchez. Deputy commander of capital airbase security." She grinned at Gavin. "And a colonel in the Socialist Democratic Militia—Kay's enemies."

Chapter Thirty-One

"These are the best troops you have?" Ana asked the sergeant, pointing at the dirty young men sitting on the ground. He'd discarded his cast, claiming his hand felt better, but he was careful what he picked up.

The Republican sergeant nodded vigorously. "Sí."

He didn't speak any standard, but he understood it well enough.

"Outstanding," Ana said. "Commander Boadella, a moment of your time?"

After meeting up with a second set of trucks, they drove for six hours through villages and hamlets, into a wooded valley near a stream. There, they found a complete camp—barracks, offices, warehouses, and others. There two truck squads had been absorbed into the larger group. The base had over two hundred men—Scruggs and Dena were the only women present—most of whom seemed very young, very ragged, and disinclined to wash.

"Yes, Centurion?"

"It's Senior Centurion. And these are the troops who will be participating in your special exercise you're keeping secret?"

"They are specially chosen, *Senior Centurion*, for our special exercise, we will be conducting with Ms. Kay in a week's time. They are the most politically aware of our troops, and they have all seen combat."

Ana looked at the assembled troops. He had laid out four of the new rifles in front of them. They were clustered around them like children at Christmas, fighting over the first look.

"Seen combat through a telescope from five miles away?"

"They are our best disciplined and most loyal troops," Boadella said. "They have all been passed as leaders by the political officer, and they will lead our troops into battle as NCOs in the upcoming fighting."

"Empire, help your regular troops, then," Ana said.

"An experienced soldier like yourself should have no trouble training such motivated students as these, especially given how much we, apparently, are paying you. Unless, of course"—Boadella frowned—"your qualifications are not truly what they were represented to us."

Ana smiled at Boadella.

Dena, standing to one side with Scruggs, jerked back. "I wish he wouldn't do that. I've told him that it's scary."

“I don’t think the centurion is that scary,” Scruggs said.

“Not now, you don’t. What about at the beginning, when you first met him?”

“I was scared then, but I was scared of a lot of things. Just getting away was hard enough, but after I was out on my own, I figured I’d done the hardest part already.”

“You’re strange, Baby Marine,” Dena said.

Scruggs shrugged.

“Ladies.” Ana snapped his fingers and gestured them over. Dena glared, but she and Scruggs stepped close. “Dena, I have to set some expectations here, establish how things are going to work from now on. I need you to stand guard over our packs—especially the ones with the radios. I don’t want anyone searching them—or worse, grabbing something while we’re not looking. Got it?”

“Sure,” Dena said. “Can I hit people?”

“You can stab them and beat them with your shoes if you want, provided it’s obvious to everybody that it was because they were stealing.”

“I can do that.”

“Good, Scruggs, come stand with me, and you watch my back for this first part. Warn me if somebody is coming at me from where I can’t see them.”

“Got it, Centurion.”

“I’m going to take those rifles from them, and I’ll give them to you. Let’s go break some heads.” Ana walked to the group of soldiers playing war.

The whole area was forested, big pines with wide canopies towering overhead, blocking any aerial observation. The groups of soldier-students were standing in clusters between the various pines. The lower branches had been cut off to well above head height, so they had a clear view in all directions.

Boadella’s people had produced a chalkboard and nailed it to three thick trees.

Ana walked in front of the chalk board. “Everybody, listen to me,” he said in a normal voice.

The groups kept fussing with their new toys.

Ana took his revolver out of his left holster—his right wrist was still in a cast—and fired a round into the ground.

The crack silenced the crowd.

Ana walked over to the nearest group, shoved a skinny trooper aside, and pointed at the one with the rifle. “Give me that. Now.”

The trooper clutched the rifle closer and said something in Spanish.

“Last chance,” Ana said. He snapped his fingers. “Now.”

The man shook his head and gripped the rifle.

Ana stepped up to him, looked him in the eyes, and slapped the man's ear hard.

The man yelped and let the rifle drop. Ana caught it with his right hand and waved it aloft, then turned. "Scruggs, catch."

Scruggs caught the rifle and laid it on the ground in front of her.

Ana walked to the next group. This group had got the bayonet on. Ana snapped his fingers again. "Give it to me, now."

The man shook his head and brandished the bayonet at him, thrusting it.

"Outstanding," Ana said. He stepped back and made a 'come on' gesture with his hand. The man yelled and rushed him, thrusting the bayonet. Ana grabbed the barrel a foot from his chest, pushed it to one side, and yanked. The man stumbled and tripped over Ana's outstretched foot, sprawling to the ground. "Good, stay there," Ana said. The man rolled over and sat up, then froze. Ana had the bayonet at his throat, holding the rifle one-handed. He waved the man down with his other hand, and he stayed on his back. "Scruggs, watch the knife." Ana threw it.

Scruggs caught the rifle and put it next to the other.

Ana turned to the remaining two groups and held out his hands. They gave up their weapons right away. Ana chucked them both to Scruggs.

He motioned the crowd in and waved them down. "Gather round. Then sit." It took a moment, but the group of thirty or so came close and sat down.

His second victim stayed down until Ana waved him up.

"Scruggs, get a piece of chalk and bring it to me." Ana held out his hand and surveyed the crowd. Scruggs put the chalk in Ana's outstretched hand. Ana picked a watcher at random, pointed, snapped his fingers, and pointed next to him. "Luis, up here."

Luis, which probably wasn't his name, pointed at himself and said, "What, me?" in Spanish.

Ana only had to frown.

Luis scrambled up and ran to him. Ana grabbed his arm, steered him to the chalkboard, and handed him the chalk. Luis stared at it like it was his last meal.

Ana put his hand on the empty chalkboard and traced it down. "Uno, dos, tres. Like that, Luis."

Luis gaped at him. Ana repeated his count. Sweat broke out on the Luis's forehead, and he stammered something in Spanish. Ana repeated his count, then put his hands on his hips and frowned.

Luis spoke louder and more quickly and faced the crowd. He burbled in Spanish. An older, neatly dressed man at the back got up and walked to them. He patted the first man on the shoulder, took the

chalk, and wrote the numbers one through ten on the chalkboard, then turned to Ana and raised his eyebrows.

"Good job, Professor," Ana said. "At least one of you can read and write." He tapped Luis and gestured to him to sit. "Scruggs, a poncho or a shirt or something to put pieces on."

Scruggs spread a plastic ground sheet down in front of Ana.

"Get a rifle and then take the parts as I hand them to you."

Scruggs returned with a rifle. Ana held the rifle up and showed it to the crowd. Then he ejected the bolt.

"Number one, bolt. Write that down, Professor."

The professor wrote something down next to the number one.

"A smart one," Ana said, handing the bolt to Scruggs. "Let's continue."

Ana field stripped the rifle, put it back together, then did it again. And again. The first time, the professor wrote the local words for the parts, then said them out loud. By the fourth time, he had the whole crowd chanting the names of the parts and grinning.

Ana put the rifle together for the last time. "Noisy group, seem to know what they can do. You"—he pointed at the biggest, meanest looking trooper in the crowd—"Tough Guy, come here." They were familiar enough with Ana's gestures now that Tough Guy came up. Ana made him sit down in front of the tarp and wait. "Scruggs, find me somebody with a watch. An analog watch if possible."

Scruggs found a man with a watch and brought him up.

"Give me a time hack when we're at zero, Scruggs," Ana said, still holding the rifle. Scruggs counted him down, and at zero, Ana handed the rifle to Tough Guy and pointed at his list. "Uno!"

It took forever. Tough guy couldn't find at least three of the pieces and needed Ana's help to locate them. He fumbled putting it back together and dropped it twice. After a sweating, cursing demonstration, he finally got it together. His friends cheered.

Ana waited till the cheering stopped. "Time, Scruggs?"

"Fourteen minutes, twenty-five seconds," Scruggs said. She tapped the watch as she said it, then looked at the timekeeper, who was smart enough to repeat that in Spanish.

The crowd cheered again but stopped at the look on Ana's face. The noise died, and Tough Guy got up, but Ana waved him back and made him stand on one side, then called Scruggs over and whispered to her. She nodded and returned to the tarp.

"Scruggs? You ready?" Ana asked.

"No problem, Centurion," Scruggs said. She cradled the rifle in her hand and looked at the timekeeper. "Just say go."

The timekeeper stared at the watch, held up his hand, and counted backward in Spanish. At zero, he slashed his hand down. "Go."

Scruggs's hands flew. She snapped all the pieces off at speed, getting to the second last piece in only a few seconds. It was a spring, and when she pried it open, it released and bounced up to land two feet in front of her. She didn't panic but stood, walked the two feet, bent, and retrieved the spring, then continued, just like that had been a planned part of the show. Then she held the rifle aloft, rotated it to show it was stripped and put it back together. Once complete, she stood, pointed it to the ground, and pulled the trigger with a click.

The crowd cheered and applauded. When they went silent, Ana turned to the timekeeper and spread his hands. The man called out his figures, and the crowd cheered again.

There was much backslapping and yelling as they talked. Ana again waited till they quieted, then had Scruggs stand next to the tough guy. He was almost a foot taller and probably a hundred pounds heavier.

"Bigger, meaner and a lot more dangerous-looking," Ana said. "But who's the more dangerous here, I wonder?" Ana waited till the noise dimmed. "Let's try a different example. Scruggs, give him that one and get yourself another."

Scruggs handed the rifle over, and the tough guy dropped down, flexed his fingers, and got ready. Scruggs returned with a second rifle and groundsheet. Ana whispered to her, and she nodded and sat. She and the tough guy faced the group. Ana nodded to the timekeeper, and he counted down the start.

The crowd called insults and encouragement as they worked. Scruggs finished first and stood. The tough guy stopped, but Ana waved him on. He kept messing with his pieces. Ana nodded at Scruggs. She walked to the tough guy, put the rifle to his head, and pulled the trigger.

Click. Tough Guy jumped and said something rude but continued working. His mates laughed and called out insults. Scruggs sat and stripped and reassembled her rifle again. The tough guy had almost finished the stripping. He jumped when she clicked the gun to his head a second time.

She did it a third time, and a fourth. By the fourth, the crowd had gone silent. The grins were gone. Tough Guy was sweating freely and cursing as he tried to get the pieces to fit. Scruggs was getting to a fifth before he finally got it together, stood, and pointed his gun at her. Scruggs finished and waited. Tough Guy pointed his rifle at her and pulled the trigger.

It didn't click. He had jammed it.

Tough Guy pulled it again and again, but no clicking noise came out. Scruggs let him try seven times before pointing her rifle at him, again, and pulling the trigger.

The big man slumped to the ground. He looked like he was crying.

The crowd sat in silence. Ana took the rifle from Tough Guy and worked the bolt, then removed a lever and held it up for the crowd to see. “He put it in backward.” He inserted it correctly, then clicked the trigger. The tough guy sat down on the ground, bathed in sweat, muttering under his breath.

Ana faced the crowd. “Questions?” Everybody was attentive. Ana nodded, then faced the two on the ground. “Again. Do it again.”

Chapter Thirty-Two

"That is the dumbest plan I have ever heard," Gavin said. "Or, in this case, read."

Dirk, Gavin, and Lee were sitting in the conference room with Kay and Mira. Mira had handed out the copy of their provisional plan for seizing the airfield and spaceport, based on her inside information as a SoDem officer.

"What my non-military friend meant to say," Dirk said, "is that we are confused about certain aspects of what you have presented, and we feel that we would benefit by a more detailed discussion of the plan and it's execution."

"No, that's not what I meant. It's stupid, that's what I meant," Gavin said. "Skipper?"

Dirk turned the pages of the plans in front of him.

"It's a great plan," Mira said. "And you're not qualified to critique this plan. You're just an engineer."

"Even lowly engineers can see issues with this." Gavin stabbed the paper with his finger. "First, this item here, 'Starship will land three companies of troops. Troops will disembark and seize the control rooms, custom sheds, and security police barracks.' No other details. How are they going to do that?"

"They'll have guns," Mira said. "Rifles and hand grenades. What's the problem?"

"The problem, first of all," Gavin said, "is getting three hundred troops in our ship. We don't have room. We could cram maybe fifty inside, jamming up the corridors."

"What about all those containers you have?" Mira asked. "We can push troops into those."

"What about them? For one thing, they have no heat or light or atmosphere. If this is any sort of distance, everyone in there will suffocate, and if we go high enough, we'll freeze them."

"Keep in the atmosphere, then," Mira said. "There's air."

"Not enough at altitude. Haven't you ever heard of pressurizing an aircraft?"

Mira threw up her hands. "You can go to space, but you can't go into atmosphere?"

"Cargo in containers doesn't need atmosphere, so it doesn't have any."

"Pipe some air in. Hot air," Mira said. "Keep 'em warm."

“I could rig that, given enough time,” Gavin said. “But those containers have no seats.”

“You think our troops are such wimps they need seats?” Mira asked. “They’re tough. They can stand. What else do you think they need, a drink service and a meal?”

“We have to land—and quickly—under this plan,” Gavin said. “What’s going to happen to them when we land? Jammed into a metal box like that.”

“A few bruises never hurt anyone,” Mira said.

“Having your head slammed into a metal plate as you decelerate at two Gs coming into an atmosphere will hurt you. The landings are going to be so violent that any of your people not strapped in will have broken arms, legs, or heads from the buffeting, if not internal injuries. They’ll be landing containers of jellied meat is what they’ll be.”

“Plus the vomit,” Lee said. She shuffled her papers into a pile and pushed them away.

“Vomit?” Mira asked.

“I forgot about that,” Kay said. “There will be vomit. The pilot here is famous for his hard landings. He gets you where you want, but you won’t be happy when you get there.”

Dirk shuffled his papers. “The engineer’s questions notwithstanding. I have a few more practical military concerns. When we land. How will they get out?”

“Through the hatch, you Imperial idiots, through the hatch,” Mira said.

“You’re training is police, not military, correct?” Dirk asked.

“Not that it matters,” Mira said.

“Ever cleared a room? Went in with people inside?” Dirk asked.

“Sure, every first-year cadet has,” Mira said.

“We have a ramp and two air locks. The ramp allows us to debouch one, maybe two at a time. Probably not two with equipment, but we can test that. The other two air locks make more than one exit. Each air lock has three hatches, but one’s on the top of the ship, one’s on the side—the side one will be twenty feet above ground with no ladder, and the bottom one has a ladder, but it has to be deployed before you can climb down it. And the ship will be pretty hot if it comes in from an orbital path. We might be able to get three people off concurrently at once.”

“I can count. Three doors equals three people at once.”

“If you had to put fifty people through a room, or even three hundred like you wanted, and you had one door, how difficult would it be for one man with a gun to stop them?” Dirk pulled a map out of the pile. “Here, you have us landing within sight of the police

barracks. Two reasonably alert officers with handguns could hold off a whole shipload of troops, even if they came out firing."

"They are not going to respond that fast," Mira said.

"What's stopping them from responding?"

"Me. I'm their boss. I'll see that they're otherwise occupied."

"Which leads to another point," Dirk said. "We can do three runs in three or four hours—which will only work if we have the troops stashed somewhere nearby, drop perhaps two hundred lightly armed soldiers. They take over the airfield. Great news! Then, that day or the next, the army comes and wipes you out. They must have thousands of troops within a day's march of the capital. What's the point?"

"The point," Kay said, tapping the hangers on the map, "is that if we take the airfield, even for an hour, we can destroy those planes and their fueling and maintenance equipment. Once we get on the ground, we can send squads to attack them. No planes, no air support. No air support. We can attack from east and south of the capital with our militia, easily defeat the SoDems' regular troops. Without their air support, our offensive will make real progress. We'll be in the city in a week."

"And then you do, what, hang Ms. Mira here as a traitor?" Gavin asked.

"You're looking at the new commander of the capital airfield and base," Mira said. "The only SoDem officer who realized the futility of fighting against the legitimate government of New Oregon. As a result of my actions allowing the government forces to recapture the capital, I will become the new commander of the capital district security forces, including the airfield. Which the position requires a general officer, so, of course, it will be necessary to promote me."

"This has lots of moving parts. It's very complicated," Dirk said. "What if the troops at the airfield can't hold out till your militia arrives?"

"After the planes have been destroyed, we don't need them there," Kay said. "They can retreat into the town and fade into the populace?"

"The populace is okay with that?" Gavin asked. "They'll just let them go?"

"Of course, they're fighting for their freedom, like we are."

"Do they know that?" Dirk asked.

"Of course they do. We just need your help with this one thing. You have the ship. Everything will work out."

Dirk looked at Gavin and Lee. Gavin shook his head. Lee grimaced. "No," Dirk said. "It's too dangerous. Too many people could get killed. And we're not going to get involved. It's not our thing."

"We hired you as advisers," Kay said. "So, advise."

"My advice is, don't do this," Dirk said. "My advice to myself is not

to do this."

"Don't do it because it's too dangerous or don't do it because you don't want the responsibility?"

"Both," Dirk said.

"He's a coward," Mira said. "Kay, I told you that we don't need him. All these Imperials are liars and cowards. We can set up another plan."

Kay shuffled her notes. "He's not a coward," Kay said. "Not these particular Imperials. They've done some pretty interesting things since I've met them. But he is hesitant. I'm not sure why."

"I don't want to get involved," Dirk said. "I don't want the responsibility."

"Okay," Kay said. "You're not responsible."

"Thank you," Dirk said.

"But we're still going to do it," Kay said. "We need to shut down the planes. If we don't go in with your ship, we'll go in on the ground. We'll drive in a couple of trucks. We can sneak a few in. Drive into the gate, fight our way in, then blow up some planes. We'll do it at night. Or we'll note your objections, and we'll go in ourselves. You just have to fly and keep your mouth shut."

"It will work," Mira said. "These kids are good. They can do it."

"And we'll do it with or without you," Kay said.

"You'll get slaughtered," Gavin said.

"Perhaps," Kay said. "But I think there's a way to do this, and I think Loverboy here knows how. But he won't show us."

"There's nothing wrong with the plan as it is," Mira said. "Let's just go ahead with things. We don't need their advice."

Dirk closed his eyes and exhaled. "You're going to do this the way you describe."

"Unless you can prove otherwise to us," Kay said.

"What about you personally?" Dirk asked.

"I'll be the first out of the door," Kay said. "And not only that. Guess who will be right behind me? Your centurion, your Scruggs girl, and Ms. Dena."

"Centurion is too smart to fall for that," Gavin said. "I can't believe I'm saying this, but he's not that dumb."

"He's not dumb. But he's training the troops who are going to do this. The Republican unit he's training is the one tasked to take the airfield. And even meeting him and watching him, he won't ask them to do anything he won't do. Even after short acquaintance. And you know where he goes, Scruggs will follow. For 'adventure.' And Ms. Dena will probably go as well."

"I believe the centurion doing something stupid, perhaps," Gavin said, "and, sure, Scruggs will tag along but not Dena. Why would she

do that?"

"Money," Kay said. "We'll offer her a bonus. She wants money. And I'll tell you one thing about New Oregon. It's a patriarchal place. Soon as our squads get one look at those two girls going out the door, they'll fight to follow them out there, lest they look weaker than a little girl."

Dirk shook his head. "No. We won't do it and neither will they. Once Centurion gets wind of what type of plan and how foolhardy it is, he'll call it off."

"Maybe we won't tell him the whole plan," Mira said.

"Maybe I'll tell him myself," Dirk said.

"Maybe all your communications to him go through us," Kay said. "I know your suit comms are short ranged, so you won't be able to talk to him without our help, and that stops now. He'll be told a different plan, and if you won't agree to help us with your ship, we'll put the three of them in trucks and drive them up to the city. He'll die gloriously in combat, like he's always expected. Scruggs will get more adventure than she bargained for, and Dena will—who knows what happens to her. But it won't be good."

"But," Lee said, "we—we could call"—she caught Dirk shaking his head—"could call somebody."

"Who will you tell?" Kay asked. "In two weeks, we assault that airfield. With or without you and your ship crew. Your friends go in at the front. We'll do it with your ship or without. And this will be the plan, unless you have a better one."

"Which he won't, because he's an Imperial coward," Mira said.

Dirk looked grim. Kay's face was flat. Mira grinned back. Lee bit her lip. Gavin shook his head.

"You think this is a good plan?" Dirk asked.

"It's a great plan," Mira said. "Until you can prove otherwise."

"We will need a short demonstration," Dirk said. "Can you get twenty or thirty of your folks together with packs and something like those rifles before sunset today?"

"We surely can," Kay said. "With the crew on the barges, sure. Twenty-five even."

"With packs, packs the same weight as they would have if they were carrying ammunition. Bulky."

"We've got boxes and boxes of rations. We can jam them in field packs. We've got a bunch of odd rifles."

"Can you load the rifles?" Dirk asked.

"If need be."

"Get them together. And I need a sack of potatoes. Two sacks, with fifty potatoes. Those are crucial."

"Raw or cooked?" Kay asked.

***

Two hours later, Dirk, Mira, Kay, and two large bags of potatoes stood outside of the garage. Lee and Gavin waited a few feet away. One hundred meters away, between the ship and the barges, stood two lines of troops, no more than fifty total, with packs, bags, weapons, and boxes simulating supplies.

"Remember, nothing fancy, Navigator," Dirk said. "Take her up to a few hundred feet, down the river till you hit that lake, turn around and come back. No more than twenty minutes in the air. Come back in and land gently."

"How gently?" Lee asked.

"Half as slow as my landings," Dirk said.

Lee's eyes widened, then she nodded. "Understood, Pilot."

"Engineer, once you get the all clear from Lee, drop the ramp and open the hatch interlocks. Let them drop out. On no account you leave the ship. If this was a real landing, we couldn't chance you getting shot. We'll need you to get us out of there."

Gavin nodded. "Got it, Skipper."

"Off you go. Free Trades."

Gavin and Lee went to board the ship. The ramp was down. Once Lee boarded, Gavin yelled at the troops and waved them over, and they jogged to board.

Dirk crossed his arms. Kay counted the men and women on board.

"Free trades?" Mira said. "That's what you say, an Imperial officer?"

"The Empire's a long way away," Dirk said. "You agree that this is a fair test? The short flight, and the engineer staying on board during the landing?"

"We don't need your help, Pilot, and given your lack of bravery it's probably better that we don't count on your people during the assault because I'm sure you'll let us down."

"But you need our ship."

"Want your ship," Mira said. "But it's not necessary."

"Let's see how this pans out, then," Dirk said. "Ms. Kay, are you sure that we won't be detected with that flight plan?"

"Satellite coverage this far north isn't practicable from the geosynchronous ones, and none of the polar orbitals will be in range for hours. You can fly in circles all you want, and the SoDems won't notice."

"Good enough," Dirk said.

"You never did say what you wanted the potatoes for," Kay said.

"Encouragement," Dirk said. "Pour encouragez les autres."

"What in the Emperor's name does that mean?" Mira asked.

Dirk ignored her and tapped his comm. "Gavin. There's only a few

left. Close the ramp as soon as they are on board and point them at the nets. Colonel Mira?"

"Yes?"

"How long do we wait for them to get settled, before lifting."

"Ten minutes," Mira said.

"That's not long. Are you sure it's enough?" Dirk asked.

"We broke them into three groups and told them to hold on to something, then bail out when your engineer gives the word. Once they're on the ground, they run over here and report in."

"Hold on to something," Dirk said. "Have you ever been in a starship during a landing before?"

"I've been in planes," Mira said. "Same thing."

Dirk sniggered.

"In fact"—Mira glanced at her watch—"you can go now."

Dirk popped his comm. "Lee, lift and go."

"Understood, Pilot," Lee said. The thrusters fired, and the ship lifted, perhaps twenty feet. Lee pivoted the ship, then fired the main engines and roared off. The ship stayed low but followed the curve of the river. It weaved and rolled as it flew away, the drive blast fading in the distance.

"Was that too fast?" Dirk asked.

"Seemed fine to me," Mira said. "I imagine a couple have fallen down, but that happens. The others will be fine."

"Very well," Dirk said. The three of them stood in silence. Kay and Mira spoke in low tones. Dirk played with his comm, checking fuel studies Gavin had sent him. After ten minutes, Lee's voice came on. "Ship status nominal, commencing return."

"Understood," Dirk said.

Eight minutes later, they heard the roar of the main drive, and a dot appeared downriver, snaking toward them. Dirk picked up a bag of potatoes and slung it over his shoulder. "Could you take the other bag, please, Ms. Kay?"

Kay rolled her eyes but picked up the bag. Dirk meandered along till he saw the Heart's Desire come racing around the bend. He keyed his comm. "Land right in front of us, Lee."

Lee brought the ship racing up, fired the thrusters close enough that the group had to shield their eyes from the blown sand, then dropped the ship straight down ten meters with a thump, flexing the landing legs as it settled.

Dirk waited till the dust settled and walked up to stand next to the ramp, between the bow and stern hatches. They waited.

And waited.

After thirty seconds, there was a thunk from the bow and stern.

"Hatch interlocks are open," Dirk said. "Your people can exit

anytime now."

The bow hatch dropped open in the belly, the stern, and the ramp lowered. A body fell headfirst through the bow hatch, hitting the ground with a thump.

"Ouch," Dirk said, hefting a potato.

The stern hatch swung open, and a pair of legs dangled down, kicking.

Two figures stumbled down the ramp. They got caught up in each other and tripped off, one falling face-first, the other on her back.

Dirk bopped the face up one with a potato. "You're dead. Take your potato. Remember that." He hit the facedown one as well, stuffing the potato into a pocket.

The next four down the ramp, Dirk hit rapid fire with thrown potatoes. "Dead. Dead. Dead. Dead."

The bow person was lying on the ground, groaning, and people inside were yelling. After another minute, a figure dropped out of the hatch and landed on the other. Both screamed. The person on the ground kept screaming, and the other rolled away, grabbing a knee.

The stern legs finally dropped and landed with a thud. The man stumbled and fell.

Dirk tossed a potato and smacked his chest. "You're dead. Keep that."

A person appeared in the rear hatch and dove through but snagged, hanging there from his straps, blocking the hatch.

Dirk chucked another potato. "Dead."

Another figure swung down and dropped out of the front hatch, managing to miss both figures on the ground.

"You forgot your weapon, soldier." The man clasped his hands at his chest. "Catch this." He lobbed a potato. "Dead."

He stepped back and waited. Two yelling figures lay by the front hatch, being helped by the other dead person. Six more stood shuffling around the ramp, holding their own potatoes. The rear hatch was still blocked by the hanging figure, and the one on the ground was holding his head, sitting next to his potato.

A remaining trooper walked down the ramp, cradling a rifle across his arms.

"You okay?" Dirk said.

"Two sprained wrists," the man said. "At least I hope they're just sprained. Do I get a potato?"

"A virtual one," Dirk said. "Unless you want to try to catch it?"

"No thanks. Virtual is fine," the man said.

A final figure walked down the ramp, holding his hands up. "Your engineer said to tell you that your Jovian doctor is working on four people. Two concussions, what looks like a broken leg and a broken

arm. He's helping them. The rest are too sick to move, but he figures they'll come down in ten minutes or so."

"Tell him to keep them there until they clean things up," Dirk said.

"Got it," the last man said, returning up the ramp.

Dirk selected two potatoes from his bag, turned to the two women, and looked them in the eye. "I believe you said you were going to be the first out, correct?"

"Yes," Kay said.

Dirk touched each of them carefully on the chest with his potatoes. "Dead and dead."

***

Back in the office, Mira looked at the map, then looked across at the locked door for a moment. She bit her lip, then pulled the map closer. "Okay, you're right. We can't land right there."

"You cannot, no," Dirk said. "Nor can you carry three hundred troops. Not even fifty. We could have, perhaps twenty or thirty, tied to nets or in couches. They can exit down the ramp quickly if they are not under fire. What I think—you should land close to but not on top of your objective, dump the troops, and go back for more. Do three drops total. The landing would have to be in a safe area..." Dirk ran his hands along the maps, pulled one out, and pointed. "Here. What's this open area here? And these buildings?"

Mira pointed at the map. "That's a sports field. Those are warehouses."

"Weapons? Munitions?"

"No. Administrative stuff. Food, paper, pens, stuff like that. Why do you care?"

"If it's administrative, then it won't be guarded. This big parking lot in front of it, then the sports field—there's space to land a ship next to the buildings. We land there, the troops run out, set up, and off they go. And because we won't be landing under fire, we can stuff one of the containers with weapons. We'll carry ammunition, your rifles and grenades, everything you need. Engineer can drop the lower containers in minutes."

Kay traced the map. "That's a long way from the objective—the control room is two miles away, so is the customs area."

"Twenty minutes at a fast march," Dirk said. "And if you leave a logistics group behind after landing, you could even put a vehicle in one of our containers. Or seize a few vehicles from that parking lot. Somebody will have keys. Put a tractor in the container as well."

"You want us to go to war with tractors?"

"Armies throughout history have gone to war with horses. This will be a step up. And the tractor can carry ammunition and the supplies.

Ammunition is heavy."

"We can get a tractor," Kay said.

"Can you arrange a diversion while this is happening?"

"What type of diversion?" Mira asked.

"Something in town that would draw the police's attention—a rowdy demonstration that draws off the police on site?"

Mira nodded. "The police unit at the airfield acts as a backup for the city people. If they have a problem, then we send a squad or two to back them up."

"You're the inside man—or woman, in your case," Dirk said. "What will you do? Can you stop the police from responding at all?"

"I can't stop them from shooting back at you if you storm their barracks directly, but I can stop them deploying to other sites and keep the army from showing up. And if the town calls for help, I can send multiple squads away."

"The more that you move off the field, the better," Dirk said. "That's the first group. They secure the field. How close can you stash the second and third groups? Somewhere safe I can land close to the city to shuttle them in?"

Kay pulled a larger map out of the pile. "We have several places about a fifteen-minute flight from the city where we can put them. This is the first..."

Lee and Gavin watched the discussion but didn't participate. Dirk had told them not to ask questions till they were alone.

"Pilot is the one driving things here," Lee said. "He's planning the whole thing for them."

"I think," Gavin said, "I think the pilot is gone. I think Duke Friedel is in command now."

Chapter Thirty-Three

"They wanted us to storm an airfield by landing on it?" Ana said. "Are they drunk?"

"Could have been," Dena said.

She and Ana were watching Boadella's oversized squad train in the woods. Scruggs was training them on marksmanship, using the rifles they delivered. The troops were watching her attentively as she explained the basics of accurate shooting.

Dena chewed the remains of a ration bar. "But, apparently, Dirk talked them out of it. He's redesigned the plan." She explained what Dirk's setup was going to be. "But we're not supposed to officially know this yet, on account of us not being allowed to talk on the radio at all. And shouldn't we be acting more suspicious about that?"

"I already told Boadella there that we're concentrating on training, and we're happy to stay here for the next two months, earning our money, but we'll expect to report in shortly. He promised to make it happen."

"It won't, of course," Dena said.

"There will be delays. Comm problems. Probably a field exercise somewhere in there where we will miss a visit. Then they'll send Ms. Kay, who will come to inspect us."

"Will she stay overnight?" Dena asked.

"That's a weird question," Ana said.

"I'm wondering if you'll do some inspecting of your own, after that kiss and all."

"I'm not seventeen anymore," Ana said. "I've got things to do."

"Still, she seems pretty hot for her age. Do you like her?"

"Now is not the time. But speaking of hormones"—Ana turned back to the class he was watching—"I haven't heard of any problems with Scruggs training these knuckleheads."

"Did you expect any?"

"From her? No. From them? Frankly, yes. They're such medieval lunkheads. The concept of taking instruction from a woman was bound to irritate them, but I haven't had any issues. I'm suspicious."

"That's because of Carlos," Dena said.

"Which one is Carlos?" Ana said.

"The big tough guy you picked on the first day?"

"The one that Scruggs could have shot seven times?"

"That one. He's big and mean and has a nasty reputation as a

fighter. He likes to win."

"And?" Ana said.

"And my source... my friend..." Dena said.

"I don't care what you do on your off time," Ana said. "Or what you and your friends do. I'm assuming a male friend, that captain fellow with the mustache?"

"Giancarlo. Giancarlo said that Scruggs scared Carlos. He's been in battles before, and he realizes that she could have killed him. He's a lout, but he's serious about fighting. He told everyone that Scruggs was a warrior woman, and that he intended to learn as much off her as he could. And they should all treat her with great respect, otherwise she might stop teaching him, and that anyone who insulted her would have to deal with him."

"How's he going to do that?" Ana said.

Deana's answer was drowned out as the front of the class laughed. Scruggs had been demonstrating lunging with a bayonet. Her final thrust had left her bent over at the waist, with her legs apart, and her hip cocked. One man had made a lewd gesture, and his friends laughed.

Carlos sat at the back. After the men started to catcall, he stood and walked three paces to the front. The group quieted. Carlos leaned over, picked up a man in the front row with one hand, the man's legs dangling at arm's length. He stared in his eyes for five seconds, then used his left hand to slap his face. Slap. Backslap. Slap. Backslap.

Carlos dropped the man in a heap. Scruggs had recovered from her lunge and stood straight, her brow furrowing. Carlos bowed and returned to his seat.

"He seems to have some ideas," Dena said.

***

"The training is going well, Centurion," Boadella said.

"Senior Centurion," Ana said. As he did each day, he reported to Boadella on the status of his students. "They are learning. Slowly. Their marksmanship is adequate for troops at this stage of their training. Their hand-to-hand skills are also adequate, given how little time I've had to train them. They have a tendency to get lost in the woods when they are traveling cross country, but you tell me they won't have to do much of that. Fire and movement is poor. They still tend to rush directly to the attack, rather than setting up a fire base and conducting flanking attacks."

"I would have expected you to have accomplished more in the time we have given you."

"And I would have expected that they don't have to spend three hours a day in political lectures. I could use that time. If for nothing

else, they could use the rest."

"It is important to us that our troops be politically aware, Centurion. They have to understand not only the need for the revolution, but the place of the workers and the bourgeois in it."

"It's better if they understand how to flank a position in the dark."

"That is why you are not in charge of our revolution, Sergeant."

"Thank the Empire for that."

"What?"

"Thank the Empire we have your inspired leadership, sir. But aren't you the legitimate elected government, so this isn't a revolution, is it?"

"The people's government is legitimate, whether elected or not, and we shall be sure to make that point during the fighting." The dinner bell rang. "Anything else, Centurion?"

"Senior Centurion. Have you heard from our shipmates, sir?"

"Indeed, I have. We were briefed on the new operation by them during our daily call today."

"New operation, sir?"

"Six days from now, we will leave here and be driven to a landing zone. There, we will await your companions and their ship. They will transport us to one of our regional strongholds, where we will meet up with your friend Ms. Kay and her troops. We will train together on assaulting a regional storage facility. It's a small remote garrison. And once they are removed, with our politically active militias only a few days' march, we will be able to advance, defeat the SoDems in the areas, and take our rightful place at the forefront of the liberation."

"Along with the Federalist forces, of course."

"Of course, of course, that goes without saying." Another bell rang. "Please excuse me. It is time for the evening political lecture."

"What's tonight's topic, sir?"

"The inevitability of revolutionary struggle. You and your people are welcome to attend."

"Thank you, but no sir, we have weapons cleaning and class planning to do for tomorrow."

"As you wish. Good night, Centurion."

"Senior Centurion, sir. A final question. Will you be sharing the details of the assault plan?"

"In due time, in due time."

"It will be easier to train the students if we have a better idea what they are training for. Make sure they are ready for it."

"I wouldn't worry, Centurion, they will be fine."

"Senior Centurion, sir. I'm glad you believe they will be ready for it. You must have a lot of confidence in your plan."

"Oh, it's not my plan, Centurion," Boadella said, putting on his cap

and heading to the door. “Your duke has taken control. He’s organized everything. It’s his operation and his plan.”

***

The second landing exercise went better. The third was almost a success. Dirk had made Kay find the actual groups that would be doing the fighting and bring them up north. The troops practiced loading and unloading. By dint of adding cargo nets inside the lounges, air locks, and cargo holds and stashing weapons and packs in a container, they had managed to carry forty troops. Dirk had refused to let them use the hatches to exit and had restricted them to exiting single file down the ramp.

Gavin had trained a group to winch containers down so that the first groups below had four designated cargo handlers that could lower the containers to the ground and disconnect them.

“They’re still jamming the chains,” Dirk said to Gavin.

He, Gavin, and Lee were standing next to a parked Heart’s Desire. It was cool out, and mist rose off the river.

The assault squads practiced static loading and unloading. Kay had one container specially set up to hold forty rifles and packs in storage racks and made fittings for holding a tractor and a trailer, the trailer preloaded with ammunition.

“Yes, but they can clear them now. Watch.” Gavin pointed. “That guy is using the crowbar—see, it’s unjammed now.”

One of the troopers had unwedged a chain caught in a bracket. With the jam cleared, the container dropped six feet, and the running chain punched the crowbar back into the man. He dropped from the ship and thumped to the ground.

“Of course they still need more practice,” Gavin said. “Gotta watch those when they spring loose.”

“Well, he won’t make that mistake again. Lee, what does Ms. Kay say about the other storage units?”

“She had those two others made up with the racks and the tractors already in them. The barge left this morning, and she says it will be in position at that town—Port Morning—in two days.”

“Stupid name for a town, calling it after a time of day.”

“How many planets have cities called landing or capital or first city?” Lee asked. “Besides, it’s on the sunrise side of the bay.”

The troops popped the door of the lowered container. After the last three tries had produced ugly crowd scenes at the containers rather than crowding in, Kay had assigned four people to go inside and hand out rifles and packs hand over hand. The remaining troops formed an orderly line to retrieve them and jogged off in an hour-long run to simulate the march. “How long to get these lunkheads down there?”

“New plan,” Lee said. “Twenty of the best trained left this morning for the port on the barge. They’ll meet us there at the landing point, along with sixty Republican troops.”

“Sixty untrained Republican troops? How are we going to get them in and out?”

“Kay says her people will help the Republicans lock up and load up. She says she can hide twenty people traveling on the trains but not sixty.”

“It will take twice as long to load and twice as long to unload, as with this group. What’s our new timeline?”

“You don’t want to hear it,” Lee said. “We’re going to drive in, drop the first troops off. Ten minutes for them to unload and start the attack. Then twenty minutes for us to travel to pick up the second load, then ten to load the next group—”

“We’ve never even loaded this group in ten,” Gavin said. “We’ll need more like a half hour.”

“Mira didn’t want to hear it,” Lee said. “Bottom line, under the new schedule, we drop those forty troops on the ground, including Ms. Kay, and we’ll be back with the second wave sixty minutes later, and the third wave sixty minutes after that.”

“Plenty of time for the police to respond to the landing,” Gavin said.

“Or the army,” Dirk said. “Or any Imperial forces in orbit to get instructions. Or those planes to launch. Those rockets could ruin our day.”

“I tried to tell them that,” Lee said. “But they ignored me. You should get involved.”

“I’ve already done a lot of talking,” Dirk said. “They find my voice wearisome now. They’ll get their first group dropped and their second and third if it matters. But we’ll be picking up rather than dropping off for the third one.”

“What about the old man and the others?” Gavin asked.

“I talked to them last night during my shift,” Lee said. “Almost at midnight. She said they’ve been told they will be assaulting some sort of storage facility with the SoDems and collecting weapons or something. There’s no talk of an airfield or planes.”

“Is Boadella suspicious?”

“Dena says that Centurion makes a point of acting like Boadella irritates him every time they talk, so Centurion keeping his distance makes sense. They only talk on ‘official’ matters. Dena’s boyfriend tells the same story about a warehouse. He’s keeping her in the loop.”

“Because he likes her or because he’s been told to?” Gavin asked.

“You have a nasty, suspicious mind, Engineer,” Dirk said.

“Thanks,” Gavin said.

“What does he think of this plan?”

“Dena said he made a list of all the things that could go wrong. He came up with a dozen before he gave up.”

“He thinks it’s impossible?”

“Apparently not—he thinks it’s worth a try. The police won’t be expecting it, and even if just a few people get around those planes with some grenades. They can wreck a dozen or so. That would make a big difference.”

“What about him personally?”

“He says he’s going to go along. Because he’s worried.”

“About it failing?”

“No, about the Republicans shooting him after he’s no longer needed.”

***

“Speed, speed, speed,” Ana changed. “Go in fast. Keep going. Don’t stop for anything. Half of you set up and fire. The other half run. Keep switching off until you get where you need to be. Everybody ready? Good! Give me a cheer. Cheer!”

The first squad hoorahed a revolutionary acceptable slogan that Boadella had taught them, then dispersed to wait for the starting whistle from their sergeant. The second squad remained behind, resting on the ground and waiting.

“It’s kind of eerie,” Dena said, “them not understanding standard but still able to follow your instructions.”

“About a quarter of them speak standard,” Ana said. “And more than half understand it. They’ve been told to keep it quiet, threatened probably. I can tell by where they nod when I’m explaining complex things.”

“The officers all speak standard and Spanish,” Dena said. “They could translate and probably the sergeants, too.”

“Difference is that the officers are all literate, but the men aren’t,” Ana said. “The NCOs can read and write but only Spanish. There is a definite hierarchy on this planet. A strong class-based system. These troops have been chosen carefully. Smart and educated enough to do what we want, enough language skills to keep an eye on us but not enough to be able to argue with their officers. And they’re all listening to us. I’ll bet each one of them gets interrogated by that political officer every day, asking what we said. Your boyfriend, too.”

“Twice a day, probably,” Dena said. “I don’t care. I’m not interested in his politics. I’m interested in something else. What did you tell Boadella about his plan?”

The whistle blew. The squad surged into the woods, half under a

fire base and shot at a target ahead, the other half squirming to the right until they had flanked the target and fired at it. Then they switched and repeated the maneuver. Scruggs stayed with the first half squad, shooting aimed shots as a sniper.

"Militarily, it's not bad, and I said so. I complained again about our lack of communications, and he gave his usual assurances."

"What happens when we find out the real plan, Dirk's plan?"

"I'll object strenuously if they even tell us. I figure we'll be at the assembly point before we find out. And we're supposed to find out from Dirk after we're airborne, when it's too late to object."

"They don't trust us at all, do they?"

"Don't blame them. I don't trust them. Oh, go see that quartermaster dude and get one of their big radios and practice carrying it."

"It weights a ton," Dena said. "Why me?"

"I asked to have you as my radio operator. They agreed. Probably to keep us together to keep an eye on us. You and I will be with one squad, Scruggs with the other."

"That safe for her?"

"Her boy Carlos will be there." Ana pointed—the big man was visible through the trees, taking potshots.

The sergeant yelled, and they ran off to the side. Carlos was never more than an arm's breadth from Scruggs.

Voices rose behind them, and Boadella and a group of officers approached.

"Centurion," Boadella said.

"Senior Centurion, sir. How may I help you?"

"We've been observing your troops. I must say, they are much better than they were two weeks ago."

"They still need more time, sir. If they go into your operation tomorrow, they will take more casualties than is necessary."

"Unfortunately, operational requirements mean we have to leave tomorrow. We'll travel for a day before we reach the loading area. Your compatriots will arrive early the next day to begin the assault."

"Any luck getting them to the radio, sir?"

"Unfortunately, they were out at field training exercises when I called. They should be available tomorrow."

"Understood, sir." The sergeant blew his whistle three times, and all the troops lowered their weapons.

"I have a request," Ana said.

"Yes, Centurion?"

"Senior Centurion, sir. The three of us would like to accompany the squads on their assault."

"You want to be in charge?"

“No, sir, in a purely advisory capacity. As we are here. I assumed you’ll be leading this operation, sir.”

Boadella stroked his mustache. “That is correct. I will be leading. Why do you want to be there?”

“I always like to gauge how effective my training is,” Ana said. “Dena can assist me with the radio. And the troops seem to consider Ms. Scruggs as a sort of a good luck charm. Their morale would be better if we were along.”

“Well, I was assuming you would want to stay here. Where it is safe,” Boadella said.

Ana laughed. “I’m an old war horse. I like the action.”

“There will be some danger.”

“What’s life without excitement?” Ana asked.

“Indeed,” Boadella said. “I will consider it.”

“Of course, sir,” Ana said. “But I do miss it. I do like charging forward to meet an enemy. I like to be in front of the troops, where they can see me.”

“Out in front?” Boadella asked.

“The very front, sir,” Ana said. “The place of honor.”

Boadella slapped Ana’s shoulder. “Well said. Well said indeed. You have convinced me. You’ll get your opportunity. I’ll put you in the first wave.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“But I must ask you to discontinue your training for the day. I have an important political lecture to deliver to the troops.” He twirled his mustache again. “An important lecture.”

Chapter Thirty-Four

The Republican troops lined up, waiting to climb into the trucks. The previous day, they had marched downhill from the training camp and rested under the trees. Six trucks met them, four for the troops and two for weapons, packs, and ammunition. The trucks were identical to the old-style diesel ones they had stolen before, differing mostly in paint and dents. Boadella and his other officers stood with the drivers, talking and gesturing. If the briefed plan held, Ana, Scruggs, and Dena were slated to be in the fifth truck, loaded with ammunition. They stood under the trees to the left of the squads, waiting.

Ana crossed his arms and watched the argument with the drivers. "Any word from Dirk?"

Dena didn't look at him. "As of last night, they were finished training. They had today to work on the ship. And tomorrow morning, they are lifting to meet us at the rendezvous point. I plotted where we're going to be picked up. It's nowhere near where Boadella said this warehouse was. It's an eight-hour drive in the opposite direction."

"Long day ahead for everyone," Ana said. "He say anything else?"

"Just good luck. He says the plan could work but to be careful."

"I always am. Here comes your friend, Scruggs."

Scruggs turned as Carlos jogged toward them. "Hola, Carlos."

"Hola, señorita Scruggs," Carlos said, towering over all three of them. He leaned down and whispered several words in Spanish.

Scruggs shook her head. "Sorry, Carlos, I don't know those words. Good luck, though."

Carlos spoke again, repeating the same words. Scruggs shook her head. "Sorry, Carlos. No comprende."

Carlos frowned, then jogged back to his squad and grabbed one of the men and spoke to him. The man looked at the three Heart's Desire crew members and shook his head. Carlos shook his arm. The man shook his head again and again, looking at the crew, then back to where the officers were standing.

"What's going on?" Dena asked.

"Don't know," Ana said. "That's one of the troopers who speaks some standard. He hides it, but he knows more than a few words and understands more than he shows."

The trooper continued to shake his head at Carlos. Carlos's voice got louder. The trooper brushed Carlos's hand from his arm. Carlos

leaned down, threw the smaller man over his shoulder, and jogged back to them.

"This looks like fun," Ana said. "Want to take bets on what happens next?"

Carlos dropped the man in front of the three and gestured to speak. The angry man sputtered back, then stopped as Carlos whipped out a knife and pointed it at his eye. Carlos spoke in Spanish and waved the knife.

The grounded man turned to face the crew. "Ms. Scruggs. Mr. Ana. Ms. Dena."

"Yes? Sí?" Ana said. "What?"

The man swallowed, glanced over his shoulder, then up at Carlos. Carlos brandished the knife.

"Danger. Much Danger. Danger to you. Be careful. Much careful. Mr. Boadella."

A whistle blew, the truck engines roared to life. The officers yelled, and the troops moved.

"Be careful," the trooper said, climbing up. "Danger. Mr. Boadella, much danger to you. Scruggs. Ana. Dena. Danger." He ran off to the waiting trucks.

***

"All clear back here, Pilot," Gavin said over the intercom. "My board is green, and Ms. Kay says that her people are all strapped in."

After a good night's sleep, the crew had risen early and checked the Heart's Desire out. Kay's troops had likewise settled in early after a day of rest and boarded before the sun was up.

"Hope so. Otherwise, they're in for a rocky ride," Dirk said. He tapped the intercom off. "Navigator?"

"Fuel, atmo, everything is ready to go. I've got the first and second destinations dialed in. All my courses are set. Board is green."

Dirk keyed the All Ship button. "This is the pilot. Lift in thirty seconds. We are going to be maneuvering at speed for the next..." He looked at Lee.

"Three hours four minutes," she said.

"Just over three hours," Dirk said. "We will accelerate for thirty minutes, then we will have reduced gravity, so don't panic. That will continue for almost two hours, then we'll land. The landing will be rough. The ship will shake. The atmosphere will burn. You'll hear loud noises. Many loud noises. This is all normal. When I'm on the ground, I'll tell you. My statement will be 'Grounded. Grounded. Grounded. Go. Go. Go.' Do not unbuckle till that point. If you have any questions, too bad. We're leaving now. Remember your training and good luck."

Kay crawled up behind them and buckled into her chair. "May I

address the troops?"

"Nope," Dirk said. "Wait till we're in the zero G part. We need to get moving. And you better get back to your harness well before we start landing. If you try to climb around as we're descending, you'll get killed."

"Understood," Kay said. "You must be looking forward to seeing your people?"

"Our people?" Dirk asked.

"Ana, Dena, and Scruggs. You haven't talked to them for, what, two weeks."

"Is it that long?" Dirk said. "I haven't noticed. Scruggs is always cheerful but not having the centurion and Dena snarling at me, it's kind of restful. I've enjoyed the peace and quiet." He keyed the intercom. "Lifting."

The thrusters roared to life, and the ship heaved into the sky.

***

Ana climbed back into the cab and exchanged pleasantries with their driver. He had been told the man spoke standard, but the only standard he appeared to speak was the words, 'hello,' 'good night,' and 'too much.'

They'd driven for most of the day yesterday, parked in a small hamlet for the night, slept in garages besides the trucks, and been rousted out early to start the final drive to the pickup point. Ana had insisted that one of them be awake and on watch the whole time. Because of the close quarters, they hadn't been able to bring the radios out.

"Hello," Dena said, climbing in next to Ana.

"Good night," the driver said.

"It was. And you?"

"Too much, too much," he said. "Good night."

"Too true," Dena said. "Do you agree Scruggs?"

"Agree what?" Scruggs said, climbing in and slamming the door behind her.

"Good night," the driver said.

"I did. Thanks," Scruggs said. "How about you?"

"Too much."

"Too much? Too much sleep? Too much time?"

"Never mind," Ana said. He pointed down the road. "Let's go."

The driver shook his head. Ana leaned over and pressed his knee, and the engine revved. He pointed down the road. "Vamos."

The driver shrugged and engaged the clutch. The truck lurched forward and followed the others. They were fifth in line, one truck behind them. They continued out onto a major road, turned left, and

drove on.

Fifteen minutes later, they drove through a small village. The inhabitants lined the road, waved, and called out greetings. The troops in the leading trucks waved and yelled back. Most of the spectators smiled as they waved, but some were poker faced.

They left the village and drove for ten minutes until they came to a crossroad, turned left, drove a hundred meters, and stopped. The column halted, engines running, under a set of trees.

"Why are we stopped?" Ana asked. He rolled the window down. "Overhead cover, we can't be observed. Ladies, out, but keep an eye on this guy."

Dena and Scruggs hopped out, followed by Ana. Ana strode up the line of vehicles, and Dena and Scruggs jumped back in. Scruggs sat next to the driver, her hand on her knife. Dena had transferred her slingshot from her pocket to her hand, and stretched and released the rubber.

Ana returned ten minutes later. "One-hour delay. We wait here. Necessary for operational timing."

"Why didn't we wait back in the woods?" Dena said.

"Why indeed. Bet those folks back in that town have telephones. Or radios."

"Of course they do," Scruggs said. "Hey, then, why did we drive through there? They could be calling anybody."

"They probably are calling anybody," Ana said. "Or specific anybodies. Right now, there's a phone call going out saying we just drove through that town, and somebody is calculating our arrival at a certain place. But we're not going to be on time. We're going to be an hour late."

"Why would somebody do that?"

"I don't know," Ana said. "Normally, in a military operation, you want to show up early, surprise them. But now, we're coming in late."

"It's a surprise," Dena said.

"I don't like surprises," Ana said. "They never work out well."

***

Dirk dropped the Heart's Desire onto the sports field near the airbase. He waited till Lee and Gavin confirmed everything green, then ordered the ramp to be lowered, and he made his announcement. The flight had been smooth the whole way. Kay had made a moderately patriotic speech, returned to strap into her net, and they had landed on schedule. For the next five minutes, he had nothing to do except watch the troops stream out of the ship. The first four down the ramp had both rifles and ammunition, Kay having insisted that they have at least some armed troops at the fore. She was number

five.

The troops took position at the corners of the ship, facing out. Next out were the four container troopers, who raced out and swarmed up to the external chain controls, then winched the port lower container down. The other troops filed out in good order and lined up.

“Anything of interest on the radio?” Dirk asked.

“The usual threats,” Lee said. “I’m ignoring them. They think we’re a freighter inbound who missed the field, and they’re calling us all sorts of names. A customs car is on the way.”

“We’ll be gone before then,” Dirk said. “Gavin, as soon as that container hits the dirt, lock the hatches and pull up the ramp.”

“I thought we were keeping the ramp down? In case?”

“In case they got their weapons and try to seize the ship?”

“Got it, Skipper. My hand is on the button. Let me know.”

The ship shook as the first arms container thumped to the ground.

“That’s even faster than the training,” Dirk said. He thumbed the intercom. “Now Gavin.”

“More motivated,” Lee said. She cycled through the cameras. “First squad is getting their grenades. They’re moving off to the planes. The second is loading up.”

“Let me know the second we can lift,” Dirk said.

The ramp ground up. “All the hatches are locked, Skipper,” Gavin said. “Ramp will be locked in thirty seconds.”

Dirk tapped his radio. “White Knight to Queen Bee.”

“Queen Bee here,” Kay said.

“All nominal here. Ready to exit and commence phase two on your order.”

“We’re on schedule here. Five more minutes. You’re already closed up. You were supposed to wait till we were away in case there was a problem.”

Dirk mirrored Lee’s screen. Kay and her squad, now armed, were standing next to the dropped container, waiting for the tractor and its ammunition load to exit. “Sorry, Queen Bee, our engineer misunderstood. As soon as that tractor is at a safe distance, we’re lifting to bring in your reinforcements.”

On the camera, Kay glared at the ship. She must have known where the lenses were because she looked directly at him. “Is that so, Loverboy? After you pick them up, you will be bringing them here, won’t you?”

“I’ll come back.”

“Sure you will.”

“On my honor as an Imperial officer, I will be back with your troops,” Dirk said.

“I guess that’s the best I can hope for,” Kay said. The tractor and its

burden ground out of the container and trundled to the road. “We’re pulling out. See you soon.”

“My word on it,” Dirk said. “I’m ready to lift. Lee, Gavin, any issues?”

“You back in the Navy now, Pilot?” Lee asked.

“Kind of,” Dirk said. “Sort of. Yes, maybe. At least I’m going to think more about what’s good for the Empire. You have a problem with me thinking like I was back in Imperial service?”

“I never left,” Lee said. “Board is green. Lift when ready.”

Chapter Thirty-Five

"And here we are," Ana said. "The loading zone. And those are Kay's troops." Their truck drove out of the forest. The road they were on fronted a giant plowed field, big enough to hold a dozen starships. Some low green crop, leafy, lettuce or tomato plants, filled all the rows. The road terminated at a lake a mile away.

A pier with an attached crane jutted out into the water. Two barges loaded with shipping containers were tied to the pier. On the land side, it was flanked by two open-sided warehouses. Lumber and metal frames towered inside, interspersed with shipping containers. It held construction supplies—bags of concrete, stacks of wood, piles of gravel and rock, stacks of large metal poles, and wire. Bins were full of hammers, saws, shovels, and prybars.

Two shipping containers, back doors swung wide open, were stowed next to the small parking lot. Military-painted trucks parked in clusters. On the right-hand container, a line of troops was marching in with packs and rifles and exiting without. A squad of troops stood in formation in front of the open left container, no packs or weapons visible.

"Already loaded and waiting," Dena said. "Interesting."

A shadow roared over their head.

"And here comes the navy," Ana said. "Very tight timing because of that delay."

A radio crackled. Their driver pulled out a walkie-talkie, answered a command with a single word, and slammed the accelerator down. The line of trucks picked up speed and raced down the road at full throttle. The trucks in front, full of troops, flipped down their tailgates and opened the canvas-covered sides.

"I didn't know he had a radio," Dena said. "What's happening."

"Nothing good," Ana said. "Scruggs, knife on that guy's neck, and get him to stop. Take the wheel. If he won't, kill him and take his spot. Dena, get that radio out and get the pilot online. Now."

Scruggs shoved the knife in front of the driver and yelled, "Stop."

He screamed back but held tight to the steering wheel.

Scruggs yelled again and waved the knife again. The driver's eyes widened, but he didn't let go of the steering wheel.

"Don't play with him, Scruggs. Kill him now. Get the wheel."

Scruggs screamed, and the driver screamed back. She stabbed his right arm, shoving the knife all the way through. The driver screamed

and grabbed his hand, letting the wheel spin. They rocked left, then right, as Scruggs grabbed the wheel and tried to correct, fishtailing the truck back and forth. The driver released the accelerator, and their speed dropped. They fishtailed left, then right again.

Scruggs had both hands on the wheel, shoving the wounded driver to the side, when the following truck rammed their left rear bumper. They slewed sideways, the rear truck pushing them around and over, then they flipped onto the driver's side and slid to a stop. They hung from their restraint belts as the dust billowed.

Ana hammered on his door, shoving it open.

"In the Emperor's name," Dena said. "What's going on?"

Shots rang out from ahead, invisible in the dust cloud.

"An ambush. Boadella's people timed it to be late. They're shooting Kay's troops while they're disarmed, and they're going to try to take the ship. We need to meet up with the pilot and get out of here." Ana kicked the door open and climbed up and over the frame. "Everybody out. Bring the packs—and make sure we have radios."

Dena tossed the packs out, crawled over the edge, and dropped behind the truck. Scruggs retrieved her rifle before climbing out and jumped with it in her hands. She sprawled over her ankle on landing and limped up, cursing.

"Weapons," Ana said, producing his revolver. "Dena, get your slingshot. Scruggs, load that rifle. Any of Boadella's people you see, shoot them."

"Centurion, these are our allies," Scruggs said. "They're out—"

"They're who are going to kill us, that's who," Ana said, "And Emperor's testicles. Next time I tell you to stab somebody, stab them. Don't talk to them."

More shots came from the lake direction, invisible in the dust. The Heart's Desire was overhead, circling in for the landing, thrusters roaring.

Ana yelled and pointed back down the road. Scruggs and Dena yelled back, but the thruster noise overwhelmed them all.

The thrusters dimmed, and Ana screamed, "We're taking that other truck." He ran into the dust, the others following.

The dust from the collision settled, and they made out the driver and companion from the following truck. The two Republicans ran out of the dust at them, brandishing revolvers and yelling.

Ana shot the driver twice without breaking stride. The driver slumped. The other fired off a shot, then crumpled as Ana fired two more into him and ran by the two Republicans, not pausing to check them. "Dena, drive. Scruggs, get your rifle up and shoot anybody who comes near us."

Dena ran to the driver's side, while Scruggs limped to the

passenger's.

"Where am I driving?" Dena yelled, throwing her pack in and swinging into the seat.

"Watch where the ship lands and make for the ramp," Ana said. "We'll try to load some of this military cargo onboard before we run." He threw his pack in and followed Scruggs into the vehicle, swinging up inside. He slammed the door. The dust settled, and they had a clear view of the battle by the lake.

Boadella had planned well. His four truckloads of troops had driven up, swung left off the road, and lined up broadside to Kay's waiting Federalists. Half of the troops in the back of his trucks flipped back the covers and fired their rifles at the stunned Federalist soldiers. The other half leaped over the back and charged to the containers.

All was pandemonium. Boadella's Republican rifles did terrible execution on the Federalists, but they didn't have it all their own way. The Federalists gaped, then scattered. Perhaps twenty percent of them still had not dropped off their weapons, and they sought cover and returned fire, knocking Republicans out of the vehicles. The remaining Federalists scattered and ran into the warehouse, diving behind piles of lumber or building supplies.

Boadella's troops' fire discipline was poor—they fired as fast as they could, jamming reloads into their weapons when empty. Ana and Scruggs had taught them the basics of shooting, but in the torrent of excitement, they forgot all their lessons and banged away. Half of them in the trucks fired at random, taking down some of their own troops swarming into the warehouse after the retreating Federalists.

Dena mashed hard on the start button. The starter ground, then stalled. She did it again, same result. She screamed and hammered the wheel.

"Calmly," Ana said. "It's flooded. Count to thirty, then try again."

"One, two, three, five, fifteen—" Dena said.

"Start over," Ana said. "Relax. We're okay here for a second."

Four Federalist rifleman had gone to ground behind a pile of fence posts. They poked their rifles out and shot at the nearest truck. Republican troops standing on trucks were much easier to hit than men and women crouched behind a wooden barrier. The Federalists knocked them off. One Federalist had done this before. He was firing steady aimed shots, knocking a standing Republican down with every shot. Of the forty or so Federalists who had run into the warehouse, half kept running but some stopped behind piles of cement or loads of bricks and tackled the pursuing Republicans, wrestling for their rifles, hitting them with tools. A confused battle broke out as both sides swarmed for cover, ducked down aisles, and fired in all directions.

Boadella stood behind the lead truck, gesturing at his soldiers. He

spotted Ana's truck and waved it ahead. When the truck didn't move, he looked again and realized something was wrong. Boadella hopped into the lead truck, started it, drove forward, and pivoted. The careening took his troops inside by surprise. Most fell, and one trooper and two rifles rolled out the back. He turned the truck, pointed it at Ana's, and sped at them.

***

"Definitely shooting, Pilot," Lee said, paging through the cameras. "Two groups, they're fighting each other. Both Federalist and Republican uniforms."

"They're fighting each other?" Dirk asked.

"Looks like."

The hull tinged. Gavin came on over the microphone.

"What's going on? I lost one of my landing leg cameras."

"Aborting," Dirk said. He fired the thrusters again and lifted the ship. "I'm going out and coming back again. Can you see Ana and the others?"

"No, Pilot," Lee said. "Too much dust and confusion. I can get glimpses of trucks and shooting, and a fire just started in that warehouse."

"Queen Bee to White Knight. Urgent," Kay said from the radio.

"What does she want?" Lee said.

"Queen Bee to White Knight, urgent. Emperor's hair follicles. Dirk, pick up. We need extraction. Now."

Lee keyed her radio. "This is White Knight Two. Pilot's busy. What's happening?"

"They were waiting for us. We're pinned down halfway between the landing zone and the control room in the sports stadium. They ambushed us. We lost the tractor and two-thirds of the troops. We're up at the top of the stadium, they're hunting us like dogs. We need extraction. Now."

"We haven't landed yet."

"Abort. Abort. We need you here now. Don't pick up the rest of the troops."

Lee's screens flashed yellow. A parked truck burst into flames.

"That won't be a problem," Lee said.

***

The remaining Republic truck-mounted troops jumped off their trucks and took cover below and beside them. The Federalist sniper had finally hit the gas tank of the tail-end truck, and the resulting fire spread from the engine to the body. One of the Republican sergeants ran back and forth, yelling. The Republican troops held fire, adjusted

their aim, then the sergeant yelled again, and they loosened a fusillade at the pile of fence posts.

The pile bucked and splintered as twenty rifles hammered it at once. One shot hit the light fixture above and shorted out the transformer. The transformer dropped, sparking as it skipped down the wall. It landed in a bin of roof shingles. The dry wood ignited, and smoke poured from the wooden slats of the bin.

Scruggs pointed. “Centurion, over there.”

Boadella’s truck raced at them. Dena was counting. “Twenty-one...”

“Wait for it, Dena. Scruggs, shoot them.”

“But it’s Mr. Boadella’s truck...”

“Scruggs, shoot him. Shoot him. Kill him. You need to do it now,” Ana yelled.

“But I can’t, I mean, there’s no...” She cradled her rifle.

Ana fired his revolver. The range was long, and the other truck was bouncing. He blew out a headlight and splintered the windshield, but the truck crashed on.

“Scruggs!”

“I can’t—”

Two of the riflemen in Boadella’s truck had braced themselves over the cab. They fired. One lucky shot splintered the windshield and grazed Scruggs’s arm. She started and jerked away, then put a hand to it and pulled it back, staring. Her hand was smeared with blood.

Ana kept firing. “Then, give me the rifle, I’ll get us—”

Scruggs jacked a round into the rifle and began a steady, methodical, aimed fire, shooting every two seconds. Her first shot splintered Boadella’s windshield. The second smashed a large hole where the driver would be. The third and fourth went right into the same spot.

The oncoming truck jerked right and slid to a halt, broadside fifty meters away. Scruggs continued her aimed fire, walking it down the side of the truck. Other figures in the back jerked as she hit them. After the third one, the rest went to ground behind the truck, and she held fire.

“No targets, Centurion. Should I hold on to this target.”

Dena pushed the button, and the engine rolled into life. She let out a breath, released the clutch, and stomped the gas. The truck rolled, then jerked as she dumped the clutch and spun in a half circle, racing away from the chaos.

“Shoot any Republicans you see,” Ana said.

“Sorry for locking up there,” Scruggs said.

“It happens to everybody once. I don’t think it will happen to you twice.”

“Talk later,” Dena said. “Where am I going now?”

“Where’s the radio?”

“Front of my pack,” Dena said. “I’m driving away from all that.”

Ana keyed the radio. “Heart’s Desire?”

“Here, Centurion,” Lee said. “We’re being shot at. What’s going on.”

“The Republicans are trying to kill the Federalists. They’ve been mostly successful. No pickup today, either side. We need to get out. We’re in the truck, fleeing the scene. Come get us.”

“Stand by,” Lee said.

“I’m just driving here,” Dena said, pulling onto the road. “Just driving away.”

“Centurion,” Lee said. “Pilot will put the ship down at the far end of that field, at the turnoff on the main road. Meet us there. Don’t block the field. As soon as you get there, bail. Engineer will open all the hatches. Get in any way you can.”

“Understood. Dena, keep going.”

“There’s been another explosion back there,” Lee said. “The remaining two trucks are following. They’re two minutes behind you in the dust.”

“Outstanding,” Ana said. “You going to say it, Scruggs?”

“What?” Scruggs held her rifle vertically, feeding new rounds in.

“Adventure awaits,” Ana said.

“I don’t think I like adventure anymore,” Scruggs said.

***

“I said,” Dirk said into the radio, “that I am picking up my people first, then I’m coming to get you. If I can.”

“We can’t hold out much longer here. We’ll be overrun soon.”

“I’ll do what I can,” Dirk said. “My people first.”

“Dammit, we’re all going to die here if you don’t come.”

“My people will die if I do,” Dirk said. He made a cutting notion to Lee, and she dumped the channel. “We’re dropping and as soon as we can grab those others, we’re gone. Then give me a course back to the city and Kay.”

“You’re going to go back and get her?”

“I’ll try if I can.”

“If we don’t get her, they’ll kill her. The SoDems.”

“Somebody is going to kill somebody today,” Dirk said. “But I get to decide who. What’s their status down there?”

“They’re driving to the trees. When they hit the road, they’ll have to pick a direction, or those other trucks will catch them.”

Dirk tapped the intercom. “Gavin?”

“Pilot?”

“We’re landing hard. Here’s what I need.”

***

Ana had spotted the pursuing trucks. Dena drove like a madwoman, pedal to the ground, swinging from side to side, dust spinning from the wheels.

"Where are they? Where are they?"

"He said the end of this road, in the field."

"I don't see them," Dena said.

Scruggs hammered the last of the windshield out with the butt of her gun. "I can hear him. That's the main drive spooling up."

"He doesn't need the main drive this close," Ana said. The sound cut.

"Where is he? I don't see him?" Dena said. "Where am I going?"

"Keep driving," Ana said. "He cut the drive, and the thrusters. He must be close."

"Is he landing in the trees? We can't get to him there?"

"Even Navy isn't that stupid," Ana said, looking at the mirror. "Those other vehicles are still back there."

"The road's coming up," Dena said. "The turn. Should I take it?"

"No, stop," Ana said.

Dena stood on the brakes, and they slammed to a stop before the intersection. They sat in the truck. The firing behind them had stopped. Smoke blotted out the sun, and all was silent.

"Is it over back there?" Scruggs asked.

"Somebody won. Somebody lost," Ana said. "One side is dead or has run away. The other side is there. No idea who, though."

"It's quiet," Dena said.

"No shots," Scruggs said.

"No engines, either," Ana said. "Where did those other trucks go?" Their truck shook as bullets impacted the rear. "Found them. They've stopped, and they're shooting at us."

"I'll shoot back," Scruggs said, "Let me out—"

Ana put his hand on her. "No, they have the range." The shooting stopped. He stuck his hand out and adjusted the mirror. "Dismounted troops coming up. We may have to move."

"Is he leaving us here?" Scruggs said. "Is the ship gone?"

"I don't know. What is he—yahhha."

The Heart's Desire drove out from above the trees in front of them, clipping the tops off in a shower of greenery. Rather than a gentle, flared landing with the thrusters and engines on, Dirk had circled back, pointed the ship at the field, pulsed the main drive to gather speed, then shut off the thrusters and drive. It came in at an angle like a lawn dart, a dead-stick landing. The landing would be hard on the ship but no superheated gas to keep clear of while loading.

The ship spun down directly at them, growing larger and larger.

"He's going to hit us," Dena yelled. She dove out the driver's side,

followed by Scruggs.

Ana bailed out the passenger side. The approaching ship hit the dirt twenty meters in front of the truck, skipped up, clipped the top of the cab with the bow landing strut, then dropped, crunching the belly of the ship on top of the truck.

Dena, Scruggs, and Ana rolled over on their backs. The ship blocked the light above them.

The engineering hatch flipped down, and Gavin dropped the rope ladder. “Go, go, go.”

Ana grabbed the ladder and held it rigid. Dena skipped up hand over hand like a greased tabbo. Bullets pinged off the ship.

Scruggs shouldered her rifle and climbed steadily after her. Ana waited till he saw her disappear into the belly, then climbed, sticking to one side of the swaying ladder and keeping the rope to his chest.

A ricochet hit his arm. He reached the level of the hatch, and hands grabbed his shoulders, arms, and pack. His three crewmates hauled him in, rolling over the side as he clambered in.

Gavin leaned down and dragged the outer hatch up, and Dena spun the wheel.

Scruggs punched the intercom. “We’re in. Go. Go. Go.”

***

Dirk lifted and sailed over the lake, glanced at the course Lee put on his screen, and accelerated for the city. “Tell them to stay in the lock till I’m up to speed.”

“Got it, Pilot.” Lee relayed the message and got confirmation. “They’re waiting there.”

“Good,” Dirk said. “Smooth sailing till we get to the city. One circle. If anybody shoots at us with anything other than a rifle, we leave her. Then we get out of this system. What’s that?”

A light on his board flashed yellow.

“That’s the in-system radio,” Lee said. She switched channels and put it on the intercom.”

“. . . I say again. This is the Imperial navy warship Moose Jaw. Imperial-registered freighter, ground yourself and prepare to be boarded by local officials.”

“Crap,” Dirk said.

Chapter Thirty-Six

"No, I cannot land on the top of a building," Dirk said. "This is a starship, not a helicopter. We're optimized for space, not atmosphere."

They screamed into the capitol airbase, running as fast as he could. Lee was conducting a confused negotiation with the Imperial ship on another channel. Gavin had been calling for his attention on a third channel. Kay was yelling at him on her radio.

"We're pinned down here," Kay said. "Inside the stadium."

"Then, that's where you're going to die," Dirk said. "If you don't find another landing site."

"Come get my people, at least. I'll stay behind and cover them."

"If I can't get you out of there, I can't get your people, either."

"You heartless Imperial bastard," Kay said.

"I can't change physics," Dirk said. "We won't fit on the roof. Find somewhere else for me to land."

"Emperor's knuckles," Kay yelled, then clicked off.

"Gavin?" Dirk said, clicking on Gavin's channel.

"Skipper, we have—"

"Not now. Will we explode or break into pieces in the next ten minutes."

"Not in the next ten minutes, but if we take fifteen—"

"Then hold it together for that long. I'm making one more landing and getting what's left of Kay's group, then I'll deal with you."

Dirk hit the intercom. "Centurion, to the control room or get on the intercom. Now." He turned to Lee. "What's that corvette doing?"

"Demanding we land and surrender. Right now. Or they'll shoot us down."

"They won't shoot us down over a populated area, even if they have the skills, which they probably don't. Tell them we're complying and will be landing at the capitol airbase. Give them the coordinates and tell them we will land and await inspection by Imperial authorities, then cut them off."

"What is it, Navy?" Ana said, coming into the control room behind them.

"Centurion, we need to extract Ms. Kay and her remaining people in the next five minutes. I will land this ship wherever you need. Tell me where and what they need to do."

"You getting all Imperial on me, Navy?"

"Dammit," Dirk yelled. "I'm an Imperial duke, a shuttle pilot, and

the captain of your ship. We're getting them out. Are you helping or not?"

Ana's eyes widened, then he grinned. "Outstanding. What's their tactical situation? Where are they located, exactly? Do they have cover? Are they engaged?"

"Bad, not exactly sure. Not much and heavily," Dirk said. "Lee, show him some imagery."

Lee and Ana played with their systems, consulting, then Ana keyed the radio. "Queen Bee, this is White Knight-3. We are inbound for pickup. Give me your exact location, numbers, and status."

"We're on the second floor of the sports stadium, in the middle, on the side opposite the parking lot," Kay said. "There are thirteen of us left. Half are wounded. The SoDems were waiting for us and chased us here. We're in control of this floor and the roof. Their only approaches are down a long internal corridor or across the sports field to us. The sports field is sunk down a story, so we can control it. We've got both covered, and we're hitting them as they come across. The rifles are keeping them on the far side of the field, and we're using grenades to keep them down the corridor, but we can't hold out forever. We're almost out of grenades and ammunition. And as soon as they get anything bigger, they can rush across the field and take over the roof, and we're done."

"I'm looking at your imagery," Ana said. "Can you get across the field and out to that big parking lot?"

"Run across the open field with no cover, charge up two flights of stairs to engage the SoDems, fight through them, and pass by to run out the door to the parking lot? And should we ask them to validate your parking ticket as we run through? Because that's about as likely to happen as us getting away with that."

"Understood," Ana said. "Lee, what's the scale on this?" Lee put numbers on Ana's screen, and Ana typed more numbers into his database. "Very well, stand by. We'll be there in five minutes."

"Have a plan, Centurion," Dirk asked.

"Yes." Ana pointed to the screen. "Land here. Dena, Scruggs, and I will provide covering fire. Then Ms. Kay's people can board."

Dirk flicked his eyes from the flight controls to the screen Ana was displaying, then blinked and looked again. "Can I land there?"

"That's my line, Pilot," Ana said. "Can you land there? But the navigator here says you'll fit. We'll fit."

"Navigator?" Dirk said. "Is this area big enough to fit a ship?"

Lee gulped. "This isn't a good idea."

"Our entire journey for the last while has been a series of bad ideas. This is just another one in a long line of them."

"I don't know—"

“WILL WE FIT?” Dirk yelled.

Lee jumped. “We can fit, yes, if you hit it exactly on target.”

“And if I don’t, that will be one almighty fireball,” Dirk said.

“You can do it, Pilot,” Ana said.

“Odd for you to show confidence in me, Centurion,” Dirk said.

“I’ve never complained about your piloting,” Ana said. “Everything else, yes, but not that. Navigator says you can fit. Tactically, that’s the best place to land. Therefor that’s where we should land. When we do, Scruggs, Dena, and I will provide appropriate covering fire.”

“How?”

“By going down the Empire-damned ramp and shooting at anything that moves on the far side.”

Dirk tapped his screen, brought the image up, then typed a few commands.

“Very well. Navigator?”

“Pilot?”

“Start a countdown to our landing. Comm that Imperial ship, give them our new landing coordinates. Tell them we will await inspection there. Centurion.”

“Yes?”

“Tell Kay where we’re landing and give her your plan. Cover us when we’re on the ground, get her people on board. Then we’ll lift and run. We’ll deal with the Imperials later. Carry on.”

“Sure.” Ana paused, straightened, and threw a salute. “At your orders, Duke Friedel.” He keyed the radio. “Kay, we’re inbound. We’re going to get you out.”

“How?”

“We’re going to land inside the stadium on the field, between you and the SoDems. Once we’re down, rush down those stairs and into the ship. The ones pinning you inside won’t be able to chase you fast enough. The ship will block SoDems on the far side. Besides, we’ll be shooting at them, so they’ll be suppressed.”

“You can’t land a starship on a baseball field.”

“The pilot says he can. We’re planning on trying. And you better hope it works, or you’re in trouble.”

“You’re a crazy man,” Kay said. “But that’s our only chance. Give me a countdown one minute out, and we’ll be there.”

“Outstanding. The clock says three minutes. I’ll let you know at one.”

“Got it. Will you beat that SoDem unit approaching from the north?”

“We don’t see it, and would it matter if we did?”

“Not to our situation, but it might matter to you. I have a question.”

“Now you have questions?”

“Your ship is secure against rifle fire, correct?”

“Mostly. Cameras and stuff are vulnerable. But we’re immune to most small arms.”

“What about a tank?”

Chapter Thirty-Seven

"They say they're going to land in that stadium, sir," the comm officer said.

"You can't land a freighter, even a small one in a baseball field," Subprefect Markus said. "You misunderstood. Show me the coordinates."

"They say they can, and that's the destination they gave us," the comm officer said. "Putting their coordinates on screen."

The control room crew stared at the screen. They had an overhead view of the Capital airbase and spaceport, with north aligned to the top. At the top of the screen, running east and west, was a runway for aircraft. Below that to the right were six large hangers and maintenance sheds, with a dozen aircraft visible, parked in the front. Below that was an east-west road, flanked to the north by a large sports stadium, with a giant parking lot below it on opposite sides. Five concrete circles ran along the bottom of the view, surrounded by blast walls—the starship port.

Green smears moved across the display—some truck-shaped, some car-shaped, some groups of small pinpoints that were people. A red dot pulsed in the middle of the sports stadium, obscured by green flashes every few seconds.

"Confirm those coordinates with them," Markus said.

"They're not acknowledging," the comm officer said. "They transmitted the coordinates and then went off the air."

"Is that a ground battle going on in the stadium?" Markus asked. "Those flashes?"

"I think so, sir. And it looks like their troops are converging on that stadium. Troops and this." The sensor officer zoomed in on a line of vehicles churning steadily along the main east-west road.

Eight trucks followed four boxy shapes. The four leading figures were roughly rectangular but larger than the trucks. The engine was a bright patch in the back, but the front was slashed by a narrow straight line that protruded ahead of the vehicles, sticking out half their length.

"Is that what I think it is?"

"If you think it's a line of four tanks, then, yes, sir."

"That's going to ruin somebody's day," Markus said. "Fine, we'll land on that runway where the planes are—"

The first of the planes on the runway blossomed in a green plume,

then brightened. It glowed fiercely for five seconds, then the one next to it exploded in a shower of green shards.

"Or not," Markus said. "That parking lot is empty. Put us down there but well away from that stadium. If they do land, we'll send a party over to check it out. Who wants to volunteer for some dismounted action?"

The control room crew busied themselves with their screens, not meeting his eye.

Markus shook his head. "God save the Empire!"

***

Ana faced Scruggs and Dena by the ramp. All three had rifles, pilfered from Boadella's troops. "Scruggs, aimed fire. Dena, get behind a strut and shoot what you can. Not expecting much from you."

"Screw you, old man," Dena said. "I've been hunting for years."

Ana grinned at her.

Dena's face contorted in a snarl, and she jammed her head next to his. "Yaaaaaaaaah," she screamed.

Ana rocked back. "Getting feisty, are we?"

"It's your smile. That's how it makes me feel, every time," she said.

"Well, I'll save it for when I need it, then," Ana said.

The display on the wall flashed yellow, then orange, then revealed a pall of black smoke.

Ana hit the intercom. "Is that important to me?"

"Somebody is bombing the planes on the runway," Lee said.

"About time," Dirk said. "Ship, stand by for a rough landing."

"If the pilot says it's rough," Scruggs said. She strapped herself into the netting they had secured in the hold.

Dena and Ana did likewise.

The ship rocked down and pitched on its nose, then rolled hard right, then left, then rolled up vertically, thrusters banging all the way.

The Heart's Desire tipped back.

"Going over," Dena yelled.

"Brace for impact," Ana said.

The ship continued rolling onto its back, then the thrusters fired, and the main drive burped. They bounced vertically ten meters and pivoted in the opposite direction, rolling back to level, then plummeted.

The three in the nets bounced up and down, jerking everywhere. Dust rose from inside the ship, as everything that could shake loose did. They bounced for another two seconds, then the ramp ground down.

"Outstanding," Ana said. "That pilot can drive."

“If we survive this,” Dena said, “I’m going to tell him that you had good things to say about him.”

“If we survive,” Ana said, “I’ll let you. Follow me.” He raced down the ramp, ran to the bow port landing strut, set his rifle, and peered at the far side. Dust was everywhere. “You two, take the others. Fire at will.”

Scruggs ran backward to the port’s rear landing strut, set her rifle, and started steady, aimed shots. Dena dropped behind the ramp, lay flat, and fired three-round bursts at anything that moved in the distance. Ana fired two shots, then marched to stand next to the ramp.

“Get down, you crazy old man,” Dena yelled from her prone position.

“Nah,” Ana said, peering around the strut. “I like it up here. You’re a surprisingly good shot for an uneducated, backward-planet type.”

“Are you insane? Get under cover,” Dena said.

“Here come our friends.” Ana waved the first of Kay’s group, running to their starboard side.

The first six were in pairs, one holding the other. Ana jogged out and helped the first group to the ramp, then the second and the third. Another group of three followed.

“Hold fire. Stop shooting,” Ana said. The women stopped. Kay’s people scrabbled up the ramp, but there were no shots. “Scruggs, did you kill them all?”

“No, Centurion,” Scruggs said. “Maybe three. They’ve stopped firing.”

“I know it wasn’t you, Nature Girl,” Ana said. “For all your posturing. Where are they? Where have they gone?”

The first six had cleared the ramp. The second group came, four running figures weaving across the field. The middle two of the four running figures stopped midway and fired to the front of the ship. Ana looked up, but the dust of the landing blocked his view.

“Scruggs, Dena, what’s up front? What are they shooting at?”

“Can’t see, Centurion,” Scruggs said.

Ana jogged out from under the ramp and ran out of the shadow of the ship and its dust. He had to go ten feet out to get a clear view forward.

“Huh. That’s a complication.”

A tank trundled into view from the dust. Its barrel was pointing right at him.

***

Lee cycled through the cameras. “It’s a tank. They’re not supposed to have tanks.” She and Dirk sat in the cockpit, tracking the battle.

The Heart's Desire had landed, facing the west end of the stadium, perhaps fifty meters back. Two entrance doors faced them, one on the northwest quarter, one on the southwest quarter. The door in the northwest quarter was shut. The one on the southwest quarter had been forced open, and an armored snout with a long gun attached poked out.

"We never asked them," Dirk said, keying the radio. "Everyone, we have a tank up here. Centurion? Dena?"

"It has wheels," Lee said.

"What?" Dirk looked at the screen. "Eight wheels. And there's no spinny thing—the turret. It doesn't have a turret."

"But it's got a gun," Lee said. "Big long gun. Sticks out way far in front."

She and Dirk peered at their screens, then paged through them. "It's not pointing at us. Why isn't it pointing at us?"

A knife of yellow shot off the barrel, and the air boomed. The shell passed in front of the ship, roared over the running troops, and blew a hole in the stands on the far wall.

"They're shooting at the troops."

"Shooting badly," Dirk said. The tank gun wavered and depressed. "But they're learning."

***

Ana ducked twenty feet to the ship. The shell from the tank had crossed ahead of him, over the heads of the kneeling group, and slammed into the far wall.

"Aha," Ana said. "Scruggs, with me. Dena, help the others up the ramp. We'll deal with this. Move, move." Ana slapped the remaining riflemen of Kay's group.

"We can't fight a tank, Centurion," Scruggs said, ducking beside him. "We don't have the weapons."

"But they do." Ana pointed at Kay. She and one of her troops had unlimbered the short tubes that Ana had noticed in the original weapons shipment so long ago. "Those rocket launchers she ordered."

"Handheld weapons against a tank?" Scruggs said.

"Follow me." Ana walked upright out to where Kay and her loader were fumbling with their weapons. "First of all, it's not a tank. Tanks have tracks and treads. This has wheels."

"Armored car?" Scruggs said, scrabbling along beside him. Her eyes were wide. "What?"

"Stand up, Scruggs, we're in no danger from that. No, it's not an armored car. Armored cars have light cannons on fully revolving turrets."

Scruggs stood upright, cradling her rifle. Her eyes were still wide. "I

don't see a turret, just that big gun."

"Outstanding observation," Ana said. "No turret, no tracks, big gun. That's a wheeled tank destroyer. Take an armored car chassis, up armor the front. Armored cars are easy to make. They're just car or truck frames with a big engine and lots of protection welded to them. Turrets are hard to do right—need precision machining, special metals, all that sort of thing. But mounting a standard field gun on a truck chassis, that's much easier. Any half competent welder can do it."

"Thanks for the lesson, Centurion," Scruggs said. "How do we kill it?"

Kay and her loader fired their rocket at the front of the tank destroyer. The rocket went up with a roar. The vehicle jerked to the side, and fire splayed all over it.

"Not like that," Ana said. He strode up to where Kay and her loader were. "Don't fire at the front," Ana said. "Thickest armor is at the front. You're just irritating them."

Kay's eyes were bright white orbs on a soot-covered face. "Thanks for the tip. If we don't blow that up, it'll destroy your ship. Have you got a better idea?"

"Of course," Ana said. He extended his hand. "Rocket launcher, please."

Kay's eyes widened even more. "What?"

"Your rocket launcher. May I have it, please?"

Kay shoved it at him.

"Thank you," Ana said. "Scruggs, get two of those rockets. You two, follow me."

Ana walked back to the ship, counting his paces. "Eight, nine, ten. Now, the main gun is fixed, and the coaxial machine-gun is fixed, too. They can only fire at us by turning the entire vehicle, spinning in place. If it's a local knockoff, they don't have the optical sights to shoot while they're moving, so they have to stop, acquire the target, pivot the vehicle, then shoot."

The tank destroyer's wheels spun. It turned—but the wrong way, facing away from them.

"Centurion, now is not the time for a lesson," Scruggs said.

"Kill it, you crazy old man, kill it," Dena yelled from behind the ship's ramp.

"The other problem, their problem, not ours, is their visibility is limited," Ana said, kneeling. "Load me up, Scruggs. They're looking through tiny periscopes, and it's almost impossible to see from the sides. So, we have plenty of time to pick their vulnerable areas. The side, for example."

"How can you be so calm, Centurion?" Scruggs said.

Kay and the others crouched there, stupefied.

"It's what I do. Scruggs, stand clear of the back blast." Scruggs skittered to the side.

Ana aimed carefully and pulled the switch that fired the igniter on the rocket. Fire flared out of the rear end of the rocket launcher, and the unguided projectile spat out. It smashed into the side of the tank destroyer, hitting between the second and third wheel. The explosion blew both wheels off, shredded the other two, and started a fire on the rear deck.

Ana dropped the rocket launcher. "And that, youngsters, is how you deal with unsupported armor in an urban environment. In perfect safety." Something glinted behind the fire. "Unless there is another one behind the first."

The second tank destroyer's shell whistled beside the burning wreck, past the front of the Heart's Desire, between the standing Ana and a kneeling Kay, then exploded ten meters away, showering everybody in shrapnel.

***

"Emperor's toes," Dirk said. "He got it. He got it."

"What shooting," Lee said.

"Get everybody on board," Dirk said, "and let's get—whoooa."

The second tank destroyer shell fired past them and impacted in the field. The ship shook, and lights flashed red on Dirk's board.

"Centurion, Centurion, what's happening?" Dirk yelled.

Dena's voice came on the radio. "They're down. They're down. I'm going to get them."

Dirk tapped his intercom. "Engineer, I've—"

"I know. It's cooling. We had a problem before. That last shell cut a line. I have to bypass."

"You said we wouldn't explode!"

"I never said we wouldn't melt. I'm working on it. You can lift, but do it soon, or I can't guarantee thrusters. The pump will overheat soon."

"Main engine?"

"Different system. Much as you want."

Lee paged through her settings. "Kay's people are running out, too. And that Imperial ship is landing out in the parking lot. They're demanding we send a representative to organize our inspection."

"Screw the Empire. Where's the tank?"

The dust swirled. The second tank destroyer pushed out of the door but stuck behind the burning wreck. Its muzzle and the Heart's Desire's camera flashed, and the ground behind them and to their right exploded again. Fresh clouds of dust covered the park.

Dirk watched the screens. “He can’t get the angle. We’re too far over.”

“Got them. Coming back,” Dena said.

The tank destroyer retreated into the darkness.

“I can’t see him. Where’s he going?” Lee said.

“Don’t know. Dena? You onboard.”

“Not yet. I can’t see anything out here. I’m getting Scruggs. Kay’s people are—no, she’s there, get the centurion. I don’t know. Not him. The other one. Take the other one.”

“Dena, you’re not making sense,” Dirk said.

“Shut up. It’s all dust out here, and we have to yell. Is that Kay? Where’s your other guy? You’ve got Scruggs? Got them all? Back in. Now.”

“Where’s the other tank?” Dirk asked. His board flipped red, and his intercom bonged. “What, Engineer?”

“Thruster coolant pump is shot. You can make one bounce in the next two minutes, only one. Then the pumps shut down. But either way, at the rate the temperature is climbing, they shut down for good in three minutes.”

“I need—Lee!”

The other tank had reappeared. It had retreated into the building in front of them, shifted inside, and was now coming out of the other door. As soon as it pushed the doors open, it fired. This time, the shot went across their bow from right to left and shattered the ground behind them.

“Other tank is back have to go. Dena.”

“We’re all on board,” Dena said. “Lift the ramp, and we’re gone.”

Dirk slammed his hand on the screen, and the ramp ground up.

“Dirk, we left Scruggs,” Dena said. “Grabbed a dead guy by mistake. She’s still out there. Drop the ramp.”

Dirk dropped his hand to the board, then looked at the screen. The remaining tank destroyer was trundling out onto the field. It couldn’t adjust its aim enough in the cramped corridor, but once out on the field, it could pivot.

“I can’t. It has to come up and lock up first, then we can drop it.”

“We don’t have time.”

“We can’t stay for her. They’ll have a shot in seconds.”

“We have to stay for her.”

Lee tapped her screen. “Courses laid in, Pilot. Navigation board is green.”

“Not now, Lee.”

Lee unbuckled her harness, stood, and saluted Dirk with a full crossed-chest Imperial salute. “Glory to the Empire. I’ll use the air lock and take care of her. Launch as soon as I’m out the hatch.”

“Lee, for Jove’s sake,” Dirk yelled.

But she was gone.

Dirk heard the creaking of the air lock hatch access wheel spinning behind him.

“Pilot,” Gavin said, “I’m losing coolant here. Thrusters offline any second.”

The tank destroyer exited the corridor and spun in place, the barrel swinging to face the camera.

Dirk’s board flashed another red light as the outer hatch opened, then burned solid red and didn’t go out.

The gun tracked elevated on the screen as the tank destroyer lined up for a shot.

Dirk swore and pushed the thrusters to max, and the Heart’s Desire popped up as the tank fired.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

"Why do we have to be the ground group, Captain?" the engine room rating asked as Markus walked down the boarding ramp.

"First, don't question the captain in front of the colonials," Markus said. "Second, the captain doesn't have to give reasons for his actions. And third, you three had the newest, cleanest uniforms."

BOOM.

"What was that?" the rating asked.

"That battle we saw," Markus said. "Between those rebels and the local security forces."

BOOM.

This time, part of the stadium in the distance exploded in a wall of flames and concrete.

"Looks like the rebels are losing," the rating said.

"It does," Markus said. He faced the pair of ground cars heading their way. "Smiles, everyone. Here come the locals."

BOOM.

Fire blazed into the sky, followed by a pall of greasy black smoke.

"Lots of explosions for the rebels losing," the rating said. "Are we safe here?"

"You're in the Imperial navy. You didn't join to be safe."

"I kinda did," the rating said. "I wanted to pay for dental hygienist school, so I signed up and worked in an office for two years. Then bang, I'm on your ship. Would rather be in school."

The two approaching ground cars halted. The passenger door of one swung open, and a uniformed figure hopped out and jogged at them. The two cars reversed direction and disappeared around the corner of the stadium.

"Some days, so would I," Markus said.

***

Lee dropped flat and shielded her eyes. The thrusters were extremely compressed hot gas. She wouldn't burn, but she would be slammed down. Air smacked into her back and pushed her into the ground, driving the wind out of her. Then it was gone, and she rolled sideways and gasped for breath. More dust roiled the air, and she rolled over a few times, then crawled up on her knees, stood, and ran.

An explosion knocked her down again.

Her left foot hurt from the drop from the ship, but she dragged it

along, then tripped over a figure on the ground.

"Scruggs?"

"Lee? I don't feel so good."

"Where?"

"My stomach, abdomen. All my chest."

"You'll be fine," Lee said. "I need to pick you up."

"That, I really don't want."

"I have to. Sorry, Sister Scruggs."

Scruggs screamed as Lee threw her over her shoulder in a fireman's carry. She grabbed her arm with one hand and ran through the dust. Scruggs's breathing came in long gasps, and Lee felt Scruggs's sweat pouring onto her hands.

The dark clouds cut her vision down. She slowed to a fast walk, then stubbed one foot on the wall. She reached out and touched bricks. Walking her hands along, she sidestepped to find the gate. Fifteen steps left, and she had gone too far. She reversed direction and, twenty steps later, fell into a gap. She climbed the steps, pulling her dragging leg up a single level.

Heart's Desire's main engine screamed online above her. The dust swirled more as the ship sped away under full power.

The dust thinned, and light streamed from a door ahead. She ran and tripped over an unseen step. Scruggs screamed again as she slapped into the ground. Lee cursed, crawled up a step, bent over and pulled Scruggs up again. This time, they cursed. Lee slid forward a foot at a time, heading toward the light.

A voice yelled out in the dust. SoDem troops yelled at each other. She couldn't wait any longer. Ducking and holding Scruggs on her shoulder, she ran as fast as she could, careening out the door and into the light.

Free of the door, she emerged into a cold sunlight. Two cars turned the building's corner to her left. Ahead, perhaps three hundred meters away, in the empty parking lot, the Imperial corvette sat. Smaller than Heart's Desire, it never the less had two visible weapons emplacements. The ventral was a powered mine rack. The dorsal was a spinning laser.

Lee grasped Scruggs firmly and jogged across the driveway, onto the road and across the parking lot. Four uniformed Imperials and a uniformed SoDem watched her come. Scruggs stopped whimpering and lapsed into silence.

"Sister Scruggs? Talk to me," Lee said.

Scruggs flapped bonelessly over Lee's shoulder.

A shot pinged beside her and clattered over the road. The SoDems behind her were firing.

The four Imperials yelled, and the SoDem in front waved. An

automatic weapon banged to the other side, stitching a line of bullets across the parking lot and into the Imperial ship.

The Imperials dove to the ground, and the SoDem officer held his hands up and yelled, “Stop, stop. Don’t hit the ship.”

The laser spinning on the corvette swung into action and fired three shots over Lee’s head. Lights flashed behind her, and warm air washed over her from behind as something blew up.

The SoDem officer had dropped to one knee and was yelling in his communicator. Lee ran on, passed him, and approached the four Imperial crew lying on the ground. The laser fired again as she came into the shadow of the ship. The door at the top of the ramp was closed, so Lee halted at the bottom. A figure on the ground rolled over and looked up.

“Listen, New Oregonian or whatever you are, go away. We’re shooting up your friends over there till they stop firing, and you don’t want to get caught in it.”

“Who is the captain?” Lee asked. “I need to talk to the captain.”

The best dressed of the four rolled on his side and stood. He tried to dust off his tunic, but it smeared. “That was my last clean uniform,” he said. “I’m Subprefect Markus. Who are you and what do you want?”

“I am Praetorian Lee Michaelson,” Lee said. “Of the Empress’s personal guard. In the name of the Empress, I am commandeering this vessel and crew. Take this woman to your medical bay immediately. If your medical bay is insufficient, take us to your superior fleet medical facility. Do it now.”

A man got up and helped with Scruggs. “This woman is pretty banged up, Captain.”

“Get that door opened and let’s get inside. Put her in the med pod. And you, whatever your name is, anybody can claim to be the Emperor’s cousin or whatever. That doesn’t mean that they are.”

“I have authentication codes that will prove I’m a Jovian in the Empress’s service,” Lee said.

“Lots of Jovians in Imperial service,” Markus said. “That doesn’t mean that they can commander a warship.”

“This one can,” Lee said. “And you can’t take the chance I’m lying. Deliver me to your sector commander and let them decide. If I’m lying, impersonating an official of the Imperial family carries a death sentence. To be carried out upon discovery.”

Markus grinned. “You’re pretty bold, I’ll say that. But you don’t want to meet our sector commander. He’s the scariest Imperial official I’ve ever met. He might execute you without trial as an example to the others.”

“What’s his name?” Lee asked.

“Tribune the Lord Lyon,” Markus said.

“Devin?” Lee said.

Markus’s eyes widened. “That’s his first name, yes. How do you know that?”

“Well, I’ll be with you for quite a while, then. He won’t execute me, at least not without talking to his sister first, and it will take weeks to get an answer from her this far out.” Lee dragged her foot. “And I think I sprained my ankle. Could one of you please help me up the ramp? I’ll want to see to Ms. Scruggs before we lift.”

The remaining troops looked at the captain, who gestured one of them to help the tall Jovian limp up the ramp.

“We’ll talk after I deal with these local idiots,” Markus said.

“No time, Subprefect. Please prepare to lift on my signal.”

“I don’t—” Markus said.

Lee shook her head. “Immediately, on my signal, Subprefect We are on the Empress’s business.” She leaned on her escort and limped, then turned again. “And, Subprefect?”

“What now?”

“There is an Imperial warrant out for your patient, with a reward. One hundred thousand credits. I will be needing that money. Please see that it is delivered to me. At once.”

***

“I don’t think they’re pursuing,” Dena said. “But I’m not a sensor operator. It’s my best guess.”

“Fine,” Dirk said. “We’ll take that. What about the others?”

“Centurion was dumped in one med pod,” Dena said. “Kay’s in the other. They were the two with the most serious injuries. The walking half of her people are in the air lock. The wounded ones are strapped to couches.”

“What are they doing in the air lock?” Dirk asked.

“I don’t trust them. After they dumped Kay, I had them help me strap the others in, and I told them that’s the only place they would be safe from your extreme maneuvers. They remembered the flight in, so they ran in there. Once they were in, I jammed the hatch with a crowbar. They’re not getting out.”

“Dammit,” Dirk said. He punched the intercom. “Gavin. I need thrusters.”

“Ten minutes, Skipper,” Gavin said.

“That’s it? Ten minutes?”

“I have to fix the pump cooling system,” Gavin said.

“Couldn’t you have done that back dirt side when we needed them?”

“Not without shutting the pump, and thus the thrusters off while I

patched them. We're on the main drive now, so I can shut down the pump. Ten minutes to fix and repressure the system, then the thrusters are back online."

"I wish you had done that before."

"Me too," Gavin said. "Any word from Scruggs and Lee?"

"Not yet," Dirk said. "Get us working. I'm dumping our passengers as soon as possible."

Gavin was true to his word, and two hours later, Dirk dropped onto the river ledge next to Kay's secret base. His guests cleared the air lock, and Dirk only allowed others on two at time to evacuate the remaining troops. A medical type came onboard, alone, read the medical pod output, and suggested leaving Kay there for twenty-four hours. Ana could come out after twelve.

Gavin finished fixing the damage they'd taken, and Dirk collapsed to sleep in his quarters, after Dena promised to stay up and watch the board. Dirk tried to sleep, but guilt kept him awake. After an hour, he got up and walked into the lounge.

Dena was asleep at the table next to a glass of basic. Dirk cursed, marched up to the bridge, and flipped the door open. He stopped short as he saw an awake Ana in Lee's seat, watching the boards and cameras.

"Come on in, Navy, join the party."

Ana looked miserable. He wasn't wearing a tunic or shirt, just a series of bandages strapped all over his chest. His eyes were blackened, and his right hand was back in a cast.

"What are you doing up?" Dirk said.

"Watching the boards. I told Dena to rest."

"You look sick. You should be in the med pod."

"You should see the other guy. Wait, you did. Destroyed that tank with only one shot. Great work, if I do say so myself."

"But insufficient," Dirk said, "so it doesn't count." Dirk slid into his seat and brought up his own screens.

There were no red lights, only greens and yellows.

"Doing your best always counts," Ana said. "Not trying doesn't count." He leaned over and produced his revolver. "We do need to have a talk."

"Talk away, Centurion," Dirk said.

"Do you believe I'll shoot you for leaving Scruggs behind?" Ana asked.

"What about Lee?"

"She left me once. I figure we're even now. Scruggs never did, though."

"Do I believe you *would* shoot me? Yes. Do I believe you *will* shoot me? No."

“Oddly confident for an unarmed man facing an enraged killer.”

“I don’t think you’re enraged. You’d have shot me in my sleep if you were.”

“Don’t think I didn’t consider it.”

“Yet, here we are,” Dirk said, waving around the cockpit. “Me, you, no Scruggs or Lee, your revolver. If you want to shoot, then shoot. And to the Imperial hells with you.” Dirk turned back to his board. “As soon as we dump Kay, we’re leaving this miserable planet behind and going…”

“Going where?”

“I don’t know? Have any good ideas?”

“We could go to this rendezvous where Lee said she’ll be in a month,” Ana said, pointing to a message on his screen.

Dirk perused it. “I see. And Scruggs?”

“Needs more medical attention, according to Lee. Scruggs is alive, in a med pod, and is being transferred to a larger ship with better facilities for rehabilitation. Two systems away. They’re on their way out-system right now.” Ana brought up a clock. “Given the timing of your nap and how long we took getting back here, they’re probably at about the jump limit right now.”

“The name of this ship?”

“The one she’s on is called the Moose Jaw. The one they are meeting-our old friend, the Pollux. And your old friend, the Lord Devin. She speaks well of him.”

“She knows him?”

“I’m not clear on that, exactly.” Ana shrugged. “Knows of him, in any event, and she seems confident that she’ll be rejoining us at that time.”

“There’s an Imperial warrant out for me.”

“All of us, I think.” Ana pointed at the board. “You can read the message yourself.” He hoisted himself up. “I think I might have to take a nap in that med pod myself.”

“Need help plugging yourself in?”

“I’ve been in more med pods than you’ve had hot dinners,” Ana said. “How soon can we lift?”

“We could all use some rest,” Dirk said.

“Kay’s forces are destroyed,” Ana said. “The best of them, at least. The rest will go to ground. The ones that don’t, I’ll bet her Republican ‘allies’ are busy lining up and shooting. Somebody will turn us in. In fact, that colonel must have been in on it. They’ll have troops on the way here right now. They don’t have a spaceship, but they can lay on some planes. We need to go.”

Dirk sighed. “Was it a setup from the beginning?”

“Yep. Against the Federalists, not us. By the Confeds. Remove the

unaligned groups, now it's a straight-out brawl between the Nationalist proxies and the Confed proxies. Kay was the only group with even minor Imperial tendencies, and she got outmaneuvered."

"Do you want to see her before you go?"

"And say what? 'Sorry your friends are dead and your revolution is dissolving. Your cause is lost, and your planet is descending into darkness that will plague it for years. Oh, and you're attractive—want to live in poverty on a rogue starship as a mercenary with a washed-up old soldier?' What a great offer. Think she'll take it?"

Dirk ran his board. "Get in the med pod. Wake Dena as you go by. She can help me launch. I'll get Gavin up when I'm ready to go. We'll chase that corvette and see about getting Lee and Scruggs back."

"And if we can't?"

"The sin is not to try," Dirk said. "Isn't that right?"

Ana stretched a salute. "Glory to the Empire."

"The Empire," Dirk agreed.

A sleepy Dena came up. Dirk chased after the corvette, which was broadcasting its beacon and visible. They lined up behind it and gained some before it jumped.

Dirk discovered Lee had left two jumps set up in the system. After checking them, he let the ship go on auto. Ana stayed in the med pod. Gavin checked the drives and pronounced them good.

Dena attempted to double check Lee's calculations and got lost.

"It will take a long time for you to learn to navigate," Dirk said. "But Lee's figures look good to me."

"How long till we catch Scruggs and Lee?"

"A week or less. The jumps aren't far."

"What do I do now?"

"Is everybody ready? Is the board green?"

"Gavin says so. Everything here looks good."

"Did you strap that stupid dog in?"

"Rocky is on my bed, licking himself and relaxing."

"There's a visual. Give the word."

"What word?"

"It's traditional for the navigator to make a final check, then give the command to enter jump space."

Dena paged through Lee's twelve navigator screens, checking each setting before moving to the next. "All green."

Dirk raised his eyebrows.

"Jump," Dena said.

Want to find out what happens next? Follow the further adventures of Dirk and Company in the next in the series. Want a free prequel in the

Jump Space Universe? Get your free ebook. Liked the book and want to tell your friends? Leave a review here.

Books by Andrew Moriarty

Adventures of a Jump Space Accountant

1. Trans Galactic Insurance
1. Orbital Claims Adjustor
1. Third Moon Chemicals
1. A Corporate Coup
1. The Jump Ship
1. The Military Advisors

Decline and Fall of the Galactic Empire

1. Imperial Deserter
1. Imperial Smuggler
1. Imperial Mercenary

Join my mailing list and get a free ebook

Thanks for reading. I hope you enjoyed it. Word-of-mouth reviews are critical to independent authors. Please consider leaving a review on Amazon or Goodreads or wherever you purchased this book.

If you'd like to be notified of future releases, please join my mailing list. I send a few updates a year, and if you subscribe you get a free ebook copy of *Sigma Draconis IV*, a short novella in the Jake Stewart universe. You can also follow me on Amazon, or follow me on BookBub, or even follow me on Goodreads or Facebook!

Andrew Moriarty

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Andrew Moriarty has been reading science fiction his whole life, and he always wondered about the stories he read. How did they ever pay the mortgage for that spaceship? Why doesn't it ever need to be refueled? What would happen if it broke, but the parts were backordered for weeks? And why doesn't anybody ever have to charge sales tax? Despairing on finding the answers to these questions, he decided to write a book about how spaceships would function in the real world. Ships need fuel, fuel costs money, and the accountants run everything.

He was born in Canada, and has lived in Toronto, Vancouver, Los Angeles, Germany, Park City, and Maastricht. Previously he worked as a telephone newspaper subscriptions salesman, a pizza delivery driver, a wedding disc jockey, and a technology trainer. Unfortunately, he also spent a great deal of time in the IT industry, designing networks and configuring routers and switches. Along the way, he picked up an ex-spy with a predilection for French Champagne, and a whippet with a murderous possessiveness for tennis balls. They live together in Brooklyn.

Please buy his books. Tennis balls are expensive.

Contents

Chapter One
Chapter Two
Chapter Three
Chapter Four
Chapter Five
Chapter Six
Chapter Seven
Chapter Eight
Chapter Nine
Chapter Ten
Chapter Eleven
Chapter Twelve
Chapter Thirteen
Chapter Fourteen
Chapter Fifteen
Chapter Sixteen
Chapter Seventeen
Chapter Eighteen
Chapter Nineteen
Chapter Twenty
Chapter Twenty-One
Chapter Twenty-Two
Chapter Twenty-Three
Chapter Twenty-Four
Chapter Twenty-Five
Chapter Twenty-Six
Chapter Twenty-Seven
Chapter Twenty-Eight
Chapter Twenty-Nine
Chapter Thirty
Chapter Thirty-One
Chapter Thirty-Two
Chapter Thirty-Three
Chapter Thirty-Four
Chapter Thirty-Five
Chapter Thirty-Six
Chapter Thirty-Seven
Chapter Thirty-Eight
Books by Andrew Moriarty
Join my mailing list and get a free ebook

ABOUT THE AUTHOR